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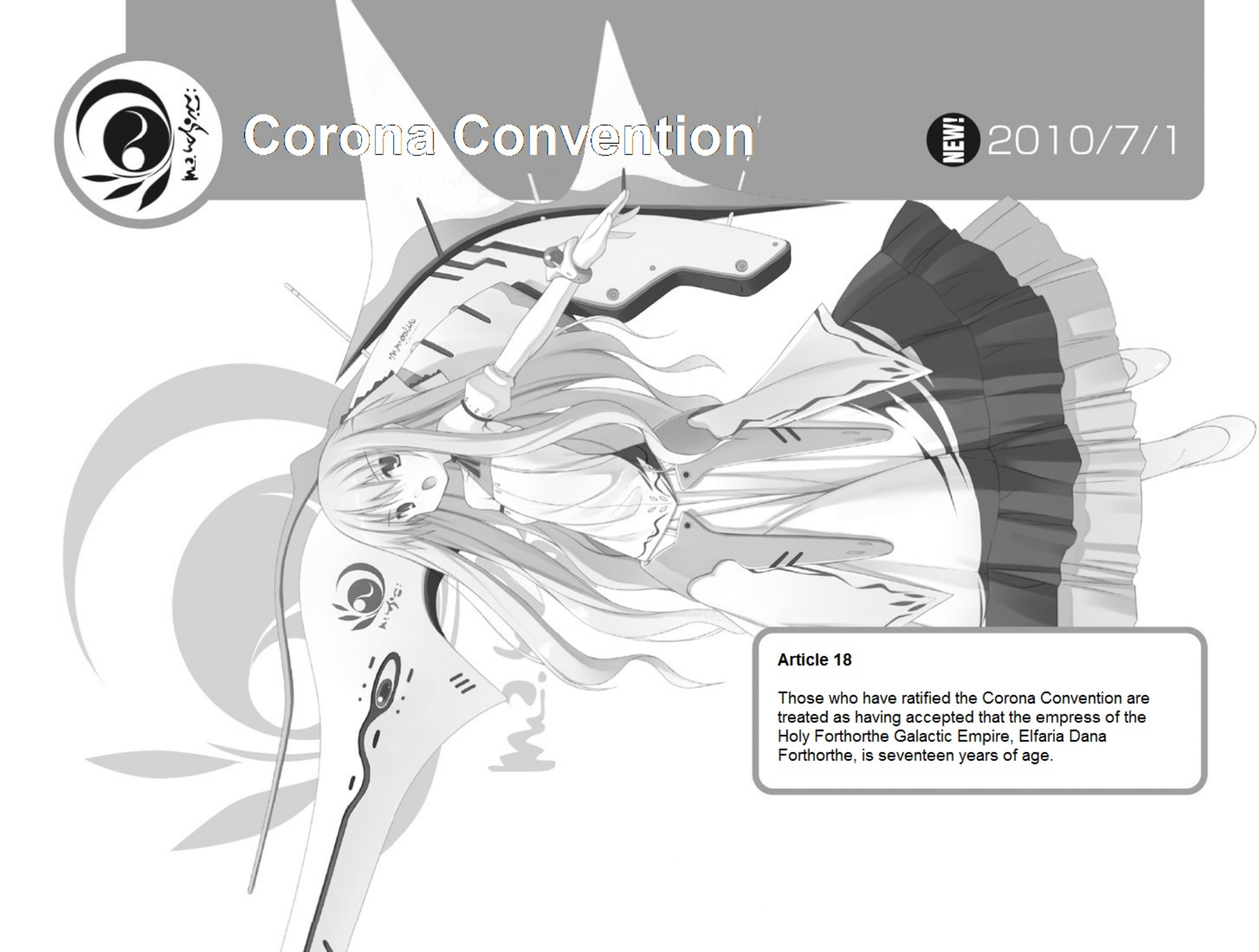
NEW! 2010/7/1



Article 18

Those who have ratified the Corona Convention are treated as having accepted that the empress of the Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire, Elfaria Dana Forthorthe, is seventeen years of age.

Shizuka's 'Path of the Dragon'

Part 1

As the date approached the middle of June, the summer began setting in properly. But despite the change in season, the landlord for Corona House was feeling a little sad.

“This season is back again...”

Staring at the calendar on the wall, a deep love, sadness and loneliness resonated in Shizuka's eyes. One of the days on the calendar had been circled with a red pen, and Shizuka was gazing at that date.

“It's already been almost five years since that day...”

Shizuka peeled her eyes off of the calendar and picked up a photo placed on the top shelf of her bookshelf. On the photo was an elementary school girl wearing a karate' dougi and holding a trophy, together with her parents. Behind the smiling trio was Corona House. This was a commemorative picture after Shizuka had won a karate tournament.

“Dad, mom, I'm doing just fine...”

Next to where the photo had been was a small memorial tablet. Two months after the picture had been taken, Shizuka's parents passed away. Ever since then, Shizuka had been protecting Corona House on her own. To her, Corona House was her parents’ legacy, and at the same time, a place full of memories. That's why Shizuka couldn't forgive anyone that would bring harm to it.

As Shizuka was staring at the photo, Sanae's face popped out from the floor at her feet.

“Hey Shizuka, tea is ready so come down.”

Sanae poked up from the floor below, from room 106, to call Shizuka. As a former ghost, astral projection was a piece of cake to Sanae, making her perfect for communicating between the floors.

“Thank you, Sanae-chan. I'll be right there.”

Shizuka decided to head to the floor below and put the photo back. As she did, Sanae managed to catch a glimpse of it.

“...That's a photo of your papa and mama right?”

Sanae could tell that it was a picture of Shizuka's parents at first glance.

“Yes. You can tell?”

Shizuka was a little confused as she had never shown Sanae a picture of her parents before.

“Yeah. Because Corona House has plenty of... residual memories I think?... those things in it.”

“That might be because they treasured it so much.”

Shizuka didn't start living in Corona House until after her parents had passed away, but she would often help cleaning it. That might be why her parents’ eagerness remained as memories.

“I think so. That's what it means when I can see lots of those memory things.”

Sanae could sense Shizuka's parent's enthusiasm in a spiritual way. Sanae had said that lightheartedly, but to Shizuka, those words served as proof of her memories, and tears filled her eyes.

“...Well anyways, hurry on down Shizuka. There won't be any snacks served if you don't.”

“Yes. Thank you, Sanae-chan.”

Seemingly sensing Shizuka's feelings, Sanae quickly left the room. Shizuka believed that Sanae was doing so out of courtesy for her, as being a spiritual being, there was no way Sanae wouldn't be able to see Shizuka's feelings.

Shizuka turned back towards the bookshelf, wiped away her tears and smiled at the photograph.

“... Dad, mom, I was lonely ever since you died... but I'm fine now. When Satomi-kun and everyone else came, they were a handful at first... but I am really happy now. I wish that these days could continue forever...”

Shizuka's expression was far from dark. The sadness from having lost her parents wasn't gone, but she had been able to form new bonds. That's why sadness wasn't the only thing inside of her anymore. There was also joy.

“... I'll go into details when I visit your graves. So sorry, but I'm going now. Everyone is waiting for me...”

Drinking tea, eating snacks and chatting. That was something natural, but Shizuka felt joy in having regained that natural state after giving it up several years ago.

A creaking sound could be heard.

“... Hmm, I really do feel like I've gotten heavier... I should go on a diet...”

As a result, she regained her composure and was able to worry about the sound of her floor creaking. Shizuka was living her everyday life to its very fullest like she had never done before.

“Fufufu, maybe I should ask everyone...”

With a bounce in her step, Shizuka left room 206.

Truth be told, not even Shizuka knew if she was really all that worried about her weight. All she was thinking of was that it would be fun to talk about weights with everyone else.

Part 2

Having come back from room 206 through the ceiling, Sanae floated slowly towards her body that was sitting in front of the TV.

“... Hey, Sanae, how do you even do that?”

“Heh?”

Sanae was planning on merging with her body, but Koutarou's word stopped her midair, and she turned her head towards him.

“Your body is sitting there playing games, but you're astral projecting.”

At this time, Sanae's body was sitting in front of the TV while playing video games. Yet, Sanae had just left her body to go up into room 206 to call Shizuka down. This was a mysterious spectacle to not just Koutarou, but everyone in room 106.

“Oh, that's what you mean.”

Sanae understood what Koutarou was wondering about and spun her finger around as she boastfully explained her trick.

“This is my god skill that I've recently learned.”

“A new technique?”

“Yeah. Hey, you, stop acting like a stranger and turn this way too.”

“O-Okay...”

The Sanae floating in the air called out to the Sanae playing games, causing her to put down her controller and turned towards Koutarou. However, her cheeks were flushed and she cast her glance downwards. She had a somewhat embarrassed and troubled atmosphere too her, completely different from the normal Sanae.

“Huh? Could that Sanae be... Sanae-san?”

Koutarou had seen the Sanae playing games before. That was how Sanae had been when she had lost her memories.

“Bingo!”

“W-Wait a moment, what are you splitting up for?!”

Koutarou began panicking, but the Sanae floating in the air was calm. In an attempt to soothe Koutarou, she showed her normal smile and shook her hands around.

“Calm down. We didn't really split up. Look.”

Next she turned her rear towards Koutarou. There, a tail-like thing extended out from around her waist, and connected to the Sanae in front of the TV.

“It's a safety cable.”

“Then you didn't split up again? You're okay then?!”

Though Sanae gave him an explanation, Koutarou couldn't calm down just yet. He worriedly looked over the two Sanaes and recalled the events when Sanae had regained her body.

“Yeah. If it was bad, I wouldn't be this carefree.”

“What... don't scare me like that. Last time was bad enough.”

It wasn't until when Sanae nodded at him again that Koutarou was able to calm down. Tension left his body in an instant and his shoulders dropped.

“Nyahahaha~, sorry.”

Sanae wanted to show off her new move, but she didn't want to cause Koutarou to needlessly worry. That's why she honestly apologized.

“So, how does that work?”

After confirming that she was safe, Koutarou finally got a little interested.

“Ehm, I only noticed recently, but this is what happens when I alone try to leave my body. Isn't it cool?”

However, she only reflected over her actions for a few seconds and soon began boastfully puffing up her chest. She was sorry, but she still wanted to brag to Koutarou.

“I don't think that's something to really brag about...”

The Sanae sitting in front of the TV dropped her shoulders in embarrassment.

“This kind of party trick is just the kind of thing you should brag about! With all your might!”

The Sanae in the air puffed her chest up and boasted like a child. It was completely opposite of the more mature Sanae sitting in front of the TV.

“... Anything goes with you, doesn't it?”

“That's not true. Since the soul is sticking together, the parts we use together can't leave the body, and on my own, I can't astral project properly.”

Koutarou was dumbfounded by Sanae who had turned into two again, but the Sanae in the air seemed to be having fun. To her, having Sanae-chan and Sanae-san exist at the same time was a fun and welcome development.

“Sanae-chan, hurry back. I can't settle down alone.”

However, that wasn't true for Sanae-san, and she seemed troubled. The sensation of having a part of her separated outside left her uneasy. And with her timid personality, she felt embarrassed when she was around Koutarou and the others. That was why she was continuing to play games even when Koutarou called out to her.

“Come on now, you're me too, so you should be bolder.”

“Even if you say that...”

“It's not like you hate Koutarou and everyone else, right?”

“T-That's true... but...”

Even though their personalities were different, they shared their memories and thoughts. The only difference between them was the way they expressed their feelings. In the end, they were still the same person.

“But... saying I like them is kinda... you know... so hurry and come back, Sanae-chan!”

“You need to stop relying on me because you're feeling troubled. If you don't become more independent, you'll never become a magnificent and ideal woman.”

“I can't become one right away!”

“Geez... what can I do with you?”

The Sanae in the air dropped her shoulders like she was an older sister with an overly timid little sister as she approached the other Sanae. She was planning on returning to her body like she had been told. The other Sanae spread her arms wide open, welcoming her.

“Thank you, Sanae-chan.”

“Starting tomorrow, we'll start working on your problems with being with others.”

“It's okay, you don't have to do that.”

“No way. We need to get Koutarou to love you too.”

“That's impossible.”

“Shut up, I said we're doing it.”

“You're kidding~~”

The ghost form Sanae entered her half-crying body. The next moment, Sanae's expression completely changed to a somewhat dissatisfied expression. It was the expression, the ghost form Sanae had been showing.

“So there you have it Koutarou. Tomorrow we'll start training that girl.”

“...Sanae... you're crazy...”

“How?”

Confused, Sanae repeatedly blinked and looked at Koutarou. As she did, the tears that had been forming in Sanae's eyes from before fell.

“How? Come on now...”

Koutarou felt a headache coming on as he wiped away Sanae's tears. But Sanae was indifferent to Koutarou's pain and instead cheerfully kicked her legs back and forth and smiled.

“But the training is necessary.”

“Why?”

“That girl is me too. I want her to get used to you as well. I want you to love everything about me. Everyone else too, of course.”

“Uhm...”

The conversation had been relatively outrageous up until now, but Sanae's reason was very logical. Sanae-chan and Sanae-san were the same Sanae. So only getting along with one of the Sanaes was indeed a problem. Wanting

Sanae to stay as Sanae-chan was the same as only wanting that part of her because it was convenient. Something like that might get in the way of Sanae's merging of personalities. In the end, Sanae was correct.

“You don't want to?”

Sanae lightly tilted her head and quietly looked at Koutarou. She then pushed her cheek into Koutarou's palm that was wiping her tears away. Both Sanaes loved Koutarou after all.

“It's not that I don't want too, but... uhm, but when you're like that, it might be bad for your body, so we can only do it when Korama and Karama are around, okay?”

“Understood Ho-!”

Sanae copied the haniwas’ speech pattern and spun around to Koutarou's back.

“I wonder if you do understand or not...”

“I do understand. Love is all.”

“...Convenient words.”

“Ehehehe.”

Sanae jumped at Koutarou's back and swung her arms around his neck.

Part 3

As Koutarou and Sanae's conversation reached a conclusion, Koutarou returned to his own work with Sanae on his back. He was currently in the process of maintaining a certain tool he was using.

“... By the way, Satomi-kun, why are you polishing a rope?”

Harumi who had been showing some interest peeked at what Koutarou was doing with his hands. He was ardently polishing the bamboo handle of a traditional insect catching net.

“How good of you for asking, Sakuraba-senpai.”

Koutarou stopped polishing the handle and presented the net to Harumi. Both the handle and Koutarou's eyes were shining.

“This Maximilian's true value is revealed during the summer season!”

“Maximilian?”

Harumi didn't understand the meaning of the word.

“... Sakuraba-senpai. Maximilian is the name that Satomi-san has given to that net.”

Confused by the term she had never heard before, Yurika who was sitting next to Harumi whispered to her. Just a few moments before, Harumi had been teaching Yurika how to solve problems.

“Ah, I see...”

Understanding the situation, Harumi slightly nodded and smiled at Koutarou.

“Satomi-kun, are you going out insect hunting?”

“Yes. When you think of summer, of course you would think of insects. And the king of the summer insects is—”

Koutarou suddenly realized what he was about to say and looked around his surroundings. Fortunately, he wasn't in a situation he needed to be alarmed of, and was able to continue.

“—The king of the summer insects is the beetle. My season has finally come!”

Koutarou tightly gripped his insect catching net and his eyes sparkled. This year, he was planning on capturing beetles. He had his trusty net, Maximilian, his insect cage, Henrietta, and the bottle filled with sap that he had been using from the start, Geraldine. It was still early in the summer season, but Koutarou was already in attack mode.

“But, but, Satomi-san, even if you capture beetles, you can't keep them here, right?”

Yurika worried for the safety of any beetles brought to this room. Based on her experiences up until now, she couldn't imagine that they would have a bright future.

“Fufufu, fear not, Yurika. I'm different this year. After all, I have princess Clariossa with me this year.”

“Hm? Did you call, Bertorion?”

Clan reacted to Koutarou's words. However, her voice could be heard from a place close to the ceiling. Clan was using one of her inventions to use one of the walls in room 106 as the floor, and she was lying on it, reading books. This was a highly useful device now that the small room 106 had more people in it.

“I did. I was telling everyone how I'd be keeping beetles at your place.”

“Ah, that's what you were talking about. We did indeed make that promise. I have some interest in the life forms of this planet too.”

“So that's why you were making preparations while looking so happy.”

Beetles couldn't be kept in room 106. That's why Yurika had only been able to keep a beetle in room 106 for a little while. But this year was different. With Clan here, they could keep the beetles on her spaceship instead. That was why Koutarou's eyes sparkled as he eagerly waited for summer to come.

“You have my love, princess Clariossa.”

“Geez... You only treat me like a princess at times like this...”

Despite Koutarou confessing his love to Clan, she couldn't take his words at face value when he was holding an insect catching net and his eyes were sparkling. On top of that, Koutarou had officially become Theia's vassal a while back. Having gotten a delayed start, Clan's train of thoughts were complex.

“Satomi-kun, if you want I can keep them in my home.”

Seeing Clan's bitter expression, Harumi offered her assistance. While Harumi was scared of aggressive animals and insects, she didn’t harbor any hatred for harmless insects.

“It's okay, Sakuraba-senpai. Clan has a fully automatic breeding cage at her place.”

“...Clan-san, then why do you look so reluctant?”

Since she had specialized equipment for it, it wouldn't be much of a pain. Yet, Clan had a reluctant expression, which caused Harumi to give her a confused look.

“...It's not like I’m reluctant... but...”

Clan blushed slightly and looked down. That gesture was all it took for Harumi to understand.

“Oh, so that's why.”

Harumi quickly smiled at Clan and glanced at Koutarou.

“...”

That made Clan turn even redder and she turned her face away.

“What do you mean?”

“That's a maiden's secret.”

Koutarou didn't get it like Harumi had and asked for an explanation , but she simply smiled and declined Koutarou's request.

Part 4

The conversation about beetles continued for a while, but it naturally stopped once Theia, Ruth and Kiriha who had gone out to buy ingredients for tonight's dinner came back. At the same time, Shizuka entered the inner room with Maki, who was preparing the tea. With that, there were a total of ten people. They were a little too many for such a small room, but as of late, this was a common scene in room 106.

“Oh? Did you get better at preparing the tea, Aika-san?”

“Thank you, Kasagi-san. Actually, I've learned how to enjoy making proper tea.”

“Koutarou, feed me a waffle. Ahh~”

“Sanae, stop playing games and get over here instead of trying to be lazy.”

“Clan-sama, have some tea.”

“Thank you, Pardomshiha. Please leave it there.”

“Sakuraba-senpai, how does that even work? The cup is sideways.”

“I don't know... I can't believe it's not magic though...”

“Kiriha, could I have one of these snacks later? I'd like my mother to try it.”

“I understand. It’s best I reserve one for her now.”

With this many people talking, room 106 was always bright and noisy. There were also cases when the civilians who had escaped from Forthorthe with Theia, and Elfaria who was on board the Blue Knight, would join in. If the room hadn't been made soundproof and vibration-insulated through magic and science, the other tenants would surely have busted down the door and shouted at them.

“Kiriha-san, can I have a moment?”

Waiting for Kiriha to get a snack ready to give Elfaria, Koutarou approached her.

“I don't mind.”

Kiriha nodded, and after handing Theia a piece of wrapped snack, she turned towards Koutarou who was crawling closer.

“Could you strip?”

“Okay.”

Kiriha nodded once more, and started removing her school uniform that she hadn't changed out of.

“Kyaaaaaaaaa!! Satomi-kun, what are you just casually demanding?!”

“S-Satomi-sama?!”

“Yeah, Koutarou!! That's not how a Japanese man strips someone!! You grab their sash and spin them around!!”

“...Uhm, Sanae-chan, I think you're getting angry over the wrong thing.”

“Sakuraba-san, does Satomi-kun want to see naked girls? In that case I'll...”

“No, stop!! Aika-san, you're misunderstanding!! Don't take your clothes off!!”

Thanks to Koutarou telling Kiriha to take off her clothes, a riot broke out in room 106.

The first ones to get angry were Shizuka and Ruth, followed by Sanae. After that, Yurika, Harumi and Maki joined in, making the situation worse. This was a fuss that brought the soundproofing and vibration-insulation to their limits.

“Show me.”

“Look as much as you want.”

However, Koutarou completely ignored them and leaned forward and gazed at Kiriha's white skin. It was an awfully serious gaze, even for a pervert.

“Kya kya kya!! Stupid Satomi-kun!! I thought you were different!!”

Trembling with anger, Shizuka swung her fist towards Koutarou. As she did, Koutarou's expression brightened up and he sat back down. As a result, Shizuka's blow cut through the air.

“Phew... looks like your wound has properly healed.”

Unaware of the danger he had been in, Koutarou smiled at Kiriha who still had her top off. Because of his relief, his smile was calm. Kiriha smiled back and nodded.

“I told you at school didn't I? There's no trace of the wound left. ...You've always been so pessimistic about these kinds of things, Onii-chan...”

Kiriha whispered the latter half so that only Koutarou could hear, and showed an expression that reminded Koutarou of how she had been when she was little. That was a special word, and a special smile, for Kiriha. She felt like Koutarou was too worried, but at the same time, she was happy that he was.

“Even if you say that, a wound is a wound. If I don't see for myself, it would be hard to believe.”

Koutarou understood what Kiriha was saying, and in truth there was nothing left of her wound. But Kiriha had received the most serious injury during the battle a while back, and Koutarou recalled the horrible wound that she had at the time. That's why he found it hard to believe her, even after she told him that there was not a trace of it left, until he confirmed it with his own eyes.

“... Onii-chan, do you hate girls with wounds...?”

Kiriha giggled and whispered into Koutarou's ear.

“That's not true. But that's not what this is about.”

“... That IS what this is about. Fufufu...”

Seeing Kiriha's innocent smile, Koutarou felt happy that the wound hadn't been anything serious. At the same time, he felt a big weight drop off of his shoulders. With this, everything was back to normal.

“... Hm?”

That was when Koutarou noticed that everyone's gazes were focused on him, and that Shizuka was standing behind him with a blank look of surprise. Unable to understand the situation, he tilted his head to the side.

“What's wrong, everyone?”

“Satomi-kun... Y-you were checking on Kiriha-san's... wound?”

“Yeah... Is something wrong, landlord-san?”

“I-I-It's nothing, nothing at all!! Right, everyone?!”

Shizuka hurriedly tried to dodge the question and turned to everyone else in the room. As she did, all the girls involved in the fuss nodded their heads as one. This action confused Koutarou even further.

“Well, something like that.”

“... If Bertorion could be seduced then things might have been a little easier.”

The only two that had remained unmoved were the two princesses from Forthorthe. They figured that there had to be a reason behind him asking Kiriha to strip. Harumi was the same, but she had been occupied by Maki who began stripping as well.

“...? Oh well. So Kiriha, does it hurt if you move your arm around?”

“There's a minor pain on rare occasions, but that'll heal soon enough too.”

While the wound had healed on the surface, it still hadn't fully healed inside, and moving the arm in a certain way would cause pain.

“I see. Then, Yurika... is out of the question. Aika-san, could you cast some healing magic on Kiriha-san just in case?”

Yurika, because of her organization, Rainbow Heart, was forbidden to use magic for private reasons. But that wasn't true for Maki, who was part of Darkness Rainbow. So when it came to treatment, it was more convenient to have Maki do it.

“Yes, leave it to me, Satomi-kun! Come, Night Walker!”

Happy to be needed by Koutarou, Aika joyfully summoned her cane.

“... I don't have to be out of the question.”

Yurika on the other hand was pouting. While she was forbidden from using magic for private reasons, she was willing to look past that for the sake of treating a close friend. She was happy that Koutarou was taking her rules into consideration, but she didn't like not being relied on.

“Don't get angry, Yurika.”

“I'm not angry.”

“You are angry.”

“... I'm not really angry.”

“You don't have to use something like magic.”

“... I-It's unfair when you put it like that... geez...”

However, with Yurika's personality, she didn't dwell on it for too long, and by the time Kiriha was pushing her shoulder towards Maki, her expression had returned to normal.

“I'm in your care.”

“Yes, leave it to me, Kiriha-san.”

Maki held her cane in both hands and began her incantation.

“Cure Serious Wounds, Permanent Regeneration.”

Maki cast two spells. One was a spell to seal her wounds, and one to improve Kiriha's regenerating abilities. Just sealing the wound meant that it might open again, so Maki improved Kiriha's regeneration to speed up the

healing process. They were calculated and polite spells that fit Maki perfectly.

"... Okay. That should do it."

"Thank you, Maki."

"No, it's nothing."

Maki showed an embarrassed smile.

This kind of thing is really nice... How wonderful it would be to spend the rest of my life like this...

A sensation she had never felt before while in Darkness Rainbow filled Maki's chest. She was happy to be needed and thanked by someone. While she still wasn't used to it and still felt a little embarrassed about it, but she began to feel like she wanted to spend her life like this. Maki felt like she could understand why Yurika was fighting.

That's right, maybe I should ask him...

Maki put her cane away and boldly spoke.

"Satomi-kun. There's something I'd like to ask."

"What is it, Aika-san?"

Koutarou drunk his tea and nonchalantly looked towards Maki. But noticing that her expression was serious, he put his cup down and properly turned to face her.

"Looks like it's something serious."

"Yes. I believe there is something we need to do for the future."

"Something we need to do?"

“Yes.”

Maki nodded and pulled out something from the bag she was always carrying around.

“I want you to place a curse on me.”

Maki handed what she had pulled out to Koutarou. It was a belt made from thick leather, but it was too short to be worn around the waist. If anything, it looked like a collar for a large pet.

“A curse?!”

Koutarou's eyes opened wide in surprise.

“Wait a minute!! Why do I need to do something like that?!”

“That is what Darkness Rainbow believes you would do since you've captured me.”

“A-Ahh... You're probably right.”

When Koutarou had fought against Maki's master, he had told Maya that he had captured Maki. That's why to Darkness Rainbow, Maki was supposed to be Koutarou's prisoner.

“Yet, I am still walking around freely like this. At this rate, Darkness Rainbow will begin to suspect something.”

“I see, I didn't think of that.”

While not much time had passed since Maki joined Koutarou and the others, Darkness Rainbow would eventually realize that Maki wasn't deprived of her freedom. Since a captive wasn't normally allowed to walk around freely, Maki might end up in a tricky spot, and there was a high chance that she would be deemed a traitor and disposed of.

“That's why I want you take away my freedom, Satomi-kun. Be it through brainwashing, curses or contracts, whatever you want.”

“W-Wait a minute, that's far too violent!!”

Koutarou understood what Maki wanted. She wanted to have her freedom deprived in a clear and obvious way so that Darkness Rainbow wouldn't suspect anything. For the means of doing so, she had prepared the collar. Placing a curse in the collar would make it look like she was under control.

“A curse that would kill me if I disobey you or that would choke me on command, something unreasonable like that, that gives off the impression that Satomi-kun is dominating me would be good.”

“N-No, there's no way I'd do something like that!!”

Koutarou refused in a fluster. He couldn't even imagine himself doing what Maki wanted.

“If you don't, we'll be found out sooner or later.”

“If you died because of me talking in my sleep, I wouldn't be able to live with myself.”

Curses, brainwashing, contracts. Regardless of what she called it, Koutarou was against carelessly doing something like the sorts to Maki. Of course, even with a curse or something in place, Koutarou wouldn't make use of it. Killing Maki was completely out of the question. But he couldn't endure pointing a gun at Maki even though he wasn't going to fire it.

A method like that would make both Maki and Koutarou unhappy, and he simply couldn’t accept that.

“Theia, Clan, Kiriha-san, help me think of a way to deceive others without using a real curse.”

“That's more like my vassal. Very well, I'll help as much as I can.”

“I guess it can't be helped. I'll help too.”

“Hmm... Those magical girls are lacking in scientific knowledge. I believe they could be fooled by making a device in the shape of a collar and adding in a function that would let them misunderstand.”

Koutarou quickly asked Theia and the others for advice. Maki simply stayed quiet and watched over them. The only thing she did while waiting for Koutarou and the others to reach a conclusion was to pick up the collar that had been left lying around.

“Aika-san...”

Seeing Maki grasp the collar, Shizuka imagined how Maki must have really felt. Since they shared the same room, she knew of Maki's true feelings.

Aika-san wants something she can rely on, doesn’t she...

Maki would no longer return to Darkness Rainbow; that was why she no longer had a place to return to. While room 106 was a place for her to return, it would take more time for her to truly feel like it. Making a place to call home wasn't something that could be made in a day.

That's why Maki wanted Koutarou to deprive her of her freedom. She wanted a clear connection to him, and she used Darkness Rainbow as a means to make it happen, even if it was an unfortunate connection that meant having a gun turned at her at all times.

I have to do something... if not, I’ll feel sorry for Aika-san...

Knowing Maki's feelings, Shizuka couldn't just leave her be. That's why she began thinking of a way to save Maki.

In the end, the countermeasure for Darkness Rainbow ended up making use of Kiriha's idea. They would use a scientific device to make it look like Maki was being held captive.

The ones that would make it were Clan and Ruth. It would have the appearance of a collar and would be able to make it look like Maki was being choked. Of course, it wouldn't have a function to actually choke her, just make it look like it. In return, it would have the same functions as Theia's and Ruth's bracelets.

Koutarou and the others concluded that using a scientific device that made it look like Maki was being choked would make the magical girls misunderstand the situation on their own.

The problem was that it would stand out in school, but this was resolved by concealing it using magic. It wouldn't be hard to make it invisible so that other students couldn't see it, and being unable to normally see it, would make it seem more real to Darkness Rainbow.

Part 5

Once a conclusion had been reached, Koutarou and the others spent the rest of the time in their own ways. There were those who began playing games, those who did their homework and more. Amongst them, Koutarou was in a kitchen holding a knife. However, that wasn't room 106's kitchen, but the kitchen on the Blue Knight.

The reason as to why he was holding a knife was Kiriha. When she tried to make dinner like normal, Koutarou told her that she didn't need to until her wound had fully healed and took the job from her. In response, she made a request for a roasted chicken like he had made for her before. But he couldn't have a large flame in an apartment, not to mention that room 106

lacked a large enough oven. As a result, Koutarou ended up preparing dinner on the Blue Knight.

“Theia, how's it going? Are you almost done?”

“J-Just wait a little longer. I've never filleted a chicken before.”

“Then should I do it?”

“I don't want to just watch. I’ll do it.”

“Nice guts. You can do it.”

“Yeah, leave it to me.”

“Master, I've finished preparing the herbs.”

“Ruth-san, please mix them in with what you made before. That'll finish up our sauce.”

“Okay, I understand. But still, these herbs sure are a bit on the strong side.”

“Ahahaha. Back then, ingredients couldn't be conserved very well, so it was necessary to use stronger spices.”

“I see, her majesty Elfaria might want to try it too.”

“Ah crap... She'll definitely complain later. She'll say that I should have called her sooner.”

“Fufufu, my mother just might.”

Theia and Ruth were helping Koutarou with the dinner. Since this was a Forthorthe-style dish and since he didn't really know how to use their kitchen, he needed their help. The three of them were cheerfully making dinner together.

Tonight's dinner was a roasted chicken like Kiriha had requested. On the side, there would be bread and soup. Since it was something Koutarou had learned during his travels, they were all simple to make. They were currently in the middle of preparing the chicken while waiting for the bread to ferment. Everything was proceeding smoothly and would soon be done. Or so it should have been.

“Ouch?!”

The chicken's legs bounced and crashed into Theia's face. Surprised by this, Theia flinched backwards a great deal.

“What's wrong?!”

“Your highness!!”

Hearing Theia's scream, Koutarou and Ruth came running.

“Did you cut your hand?! Or was it somewhere else?!”

Koutarou took the knife out of Theia's hands and looked over them to see if there were any cuts. Ruth wiped away the dirt to make it easier for Koutarou to examine.

“I-I'm fine, I just put a little too much force into it and the leg hit my face! I'm not hurt anywhere!”

Theia hurriedly explained the situation to the two that were awfully worried. At the same time, she moved her fingers around to show that she wasn't hurt.

“I see... don't scare me like that.”

“Sorry. My hand slipped a little.”

“Anyways, as long as you are safe.”

“Yes, sorry for the trouble.”

Theia was more concerned about the two worrying in front of her than her own mistake. Fortunately, smiles returned to Koutarou's and Ruth's expressions. Seeing that, Theia felt relieved and gripped the knife again.

“Alright, just a little more.”

Theia continued her work. Her knife handling was still unsteady, but she was steadily making progress with it.

“I'll ask again, but do you want me to do it? You only have to sit back and give me orders.”

Koutarou offered to take Theia's place once more, thinking that preparing a chicken was still too early for a beginner like Theia.

“No, I will do this.”

However, Theia shook her head. She stopped her work and stared at Koutarou.

“Indeed, I could order you whenever, wherever and whatever I wish.”

Koutarou had pledged his loyalty to Theia, so she could order him to do anything.

“Then just leave this—”

“But what I want is not a puppet that looks like you. I want to see and feel the same thing as you do as you move of your own free will. That's why if you cook, I will too. That is the path that I and Ruth have chosen.”

Theia smiled very happily. She was full of confidence, as if saying that was her everything.

“... It's just as you say, your highness.”

Ruth nodded next to Theia. She had the same expression as Theia. The two of them had chosen the same path in life.

“If you ask me to order you even now, then...”

The smile on Theia's face disappeared and she peered into Koutarou's eyes.

“Koutarou, live the way you wish. Laugh, hate, cry and love like you please.”

After saying that, Theia smiled again.

“This is the only order I can give to you as your lord right now.”

“Theia...”

Her smile was so beautiful that Koutarou couldn't answer her and he just vacantly stared at her.

“This might be the last order though. Fufufu...”

Theia believed that Koutarou would treasure the same things she did. That's why she wouldn't need to order him. While she might need to give him information and instructions, she wouldn't give him orders.

“That's why I will do this. I might not be able to do it like you, but I want to do it with my own hands.”

Still gripping her knife, Theia's expression turned a little childish. Thanks to that, Koutarou was able to return to normal and showed a wry smile.

“I get it, I get it, you're so stubborn...”

“Fufu, your princess is selfish.”

Koutarou gave up on trying to convince Theia. Since she's said this much, he wanted to let her do as she pleased. If he didn’t, it would feel like he's rejecting her, which he didn't want to do, both as Koutarou and as Theia's knight.

“But I'll help too. At this rate you might cut up your hand.”

“That's not true! I'll show you I can safely do it to the end! Don't take me for a fool.”

“Theia, I will live as I please and protect who I want to protect.”

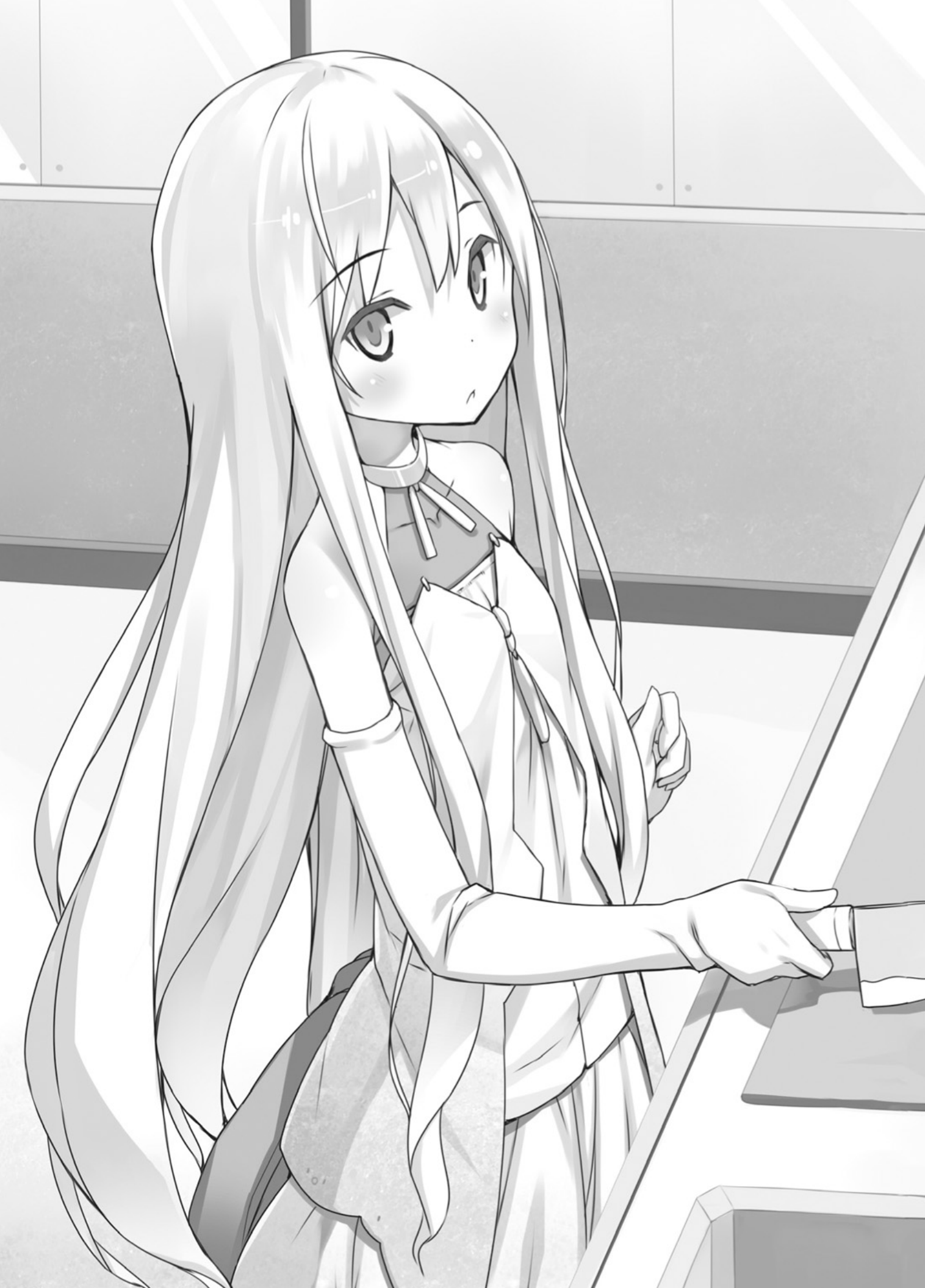
“A-Au... then I guess it can't be helped... I will allow you to assist...”

Theia instinctively blushed and cast an upward glance at Koutarou. Theia's heart began beating faster and blood rose to her head. Normally, this was only natural for a master and servant, but Theia got carried away being told he wanted to protect her.

“I am most honored.”

“G-Good, then let's start.”

Like that, Koutarou and Theia began their work. As time passed, Theia was able to calm down. Her knife handling was the same as always, but with Koutarou by her side, there was no danger.



“Wait Theia, you'll cut your fingers like that.”

“Oops, then what do I do?”

“Form your hand like this.”

“Like this?”

“No, not like that, like this.”

“I am doing that!”

“You're not! Take a proper look!”

“I did, and I am! You're misunderstanding!”

Having entered a relationship of master and servant, Theia and Koutarou acknowledged and respected each other, forming a strong master and servant relationship. Yet, the atmosphere between them was the same as it was before. They would loudly argue, glare at each other and sometimes even resort to violence. Despite their relationship, they were still just a teenage boy and girl. Before they knew it, they had already gotten past their difference in status and the planets they were born on.

But I’m sure her highness and master both don’t know how wonderful of a thing that is...

The relationship between a normal teenage boy and alien girl, and the relationship between a knight and princess existed without any contradictions. Ruth had never seen anyone else in a relationship like that before. This could surely be called a miracle amongst relationships, and compared to this, Ruth and Theia's relationship was far more realistic.

“Don't get so full of yourself because people are worrying about you!”!

“Fine! I'll show you who the master really is!”

Raw emotion was clashing in front of Ruth's eyes.

If possible, I'd want you to share just even a small portion of that...

Being able to join in that clash was currently Ruth's biggest wish. Ruth already knew that Koutarou and Theia's fights only served to confirm their bond.

Part 6

With the chicken in the oven, Theia and Ruth went to take a bath since it would take some time before it was finished. Once the two were done, Koutarou would take his turn.

Because of that, Koutarou positioned himself in front of the oven, peeking at the chicken and adjusting the temperature from time to time.

"Right... the temperature should be fine like this..."

Since this was different from roasting something over an open flame, it took Koutarou a while before he could properly adjust the humidity, but the chicken was now cooking the way he wanted it to. All that was left was to avoid overcooking it.

"Hm?"

That was when Koutarou felt the presence of someone behind him.

"That was fast, are you done already?"

Koutarou figured that the presence was Theia and Ruth and he turned around to look in the direction of the entrance to the kitchen.

"Huh?"

However, he didn't see Theia nor Ruth. The sliding door simply opened, but nobody was behind it. As Koutarou was wondering why the door had opened, several faces appeared by the frame of the door and peeked at him. Those faces belonged to young boys and girls.

“Is that the Blue Knight?”

“It is.”

“But, he's not blue at all?”

“Stupid, it's not like he's always going to be wearing his armor.”

“I think his face is the same.”

“Then it must be the Blue Knight. But why is the Blue Knight cooking?”

“Why I wonder?”

The children were talking about something while looking at Koutarou. However, since Koutarou couldn't understand the language they spoke in, he wasn't sure what they were saying.

I shouldn’t have left the bracelet behind...

They were children from Forthorthe who had come to Earth with Elfaria, and they were speaking in their native tongue. Koutarou would have been able to understand what they were saying if he used the translation functions in his bracelet.

However, he had left it behind in room 106 since it might get in the way of cooking, and his armor had been stored in the hangar after the repairs on it were completed. As a result, Koutarou had no way of communicating with the children.

“Do you have any business with me?”

That said, he couldn't just stand there and watch them. He had to talk to them in order not to scare them. In the worst case scenario, he'd have to try and talk to them using gestures.

“Wah, he's saying something.”

“What did he say?”

“I don't know, I couldn't hear it because he's far away.”

“Let's go. He doesn't look that scary either.”

“He's cooking after all.”

“Yeah, let's go.”

Koutarou still couldn't understand what they were saying, but he did understand that they seemed to have reached some kind of consensus. Based on the fact that they were now coming closer, he figured they must have been talking about that.

“What is it? Did you smell the food?”

Koutarou figured that the children must have smelled the chicken in the oven during their exploration of the ship.

“So this is the Blue Knight...”

“Yeah. Papa and I both saw him, it's definitely him.”

“He's not as big as I thought.”

“Everyone, we have to greet him properly or sensei will get mad at us.”

“Hello, Blue Knight.”

“Hello.”

However, the kids surrounded him and began talking about something. They weren't so much as glancing at the chicken in the oven. That made Koutarou stumble. If they weren't here for food, then he wasn't sure why they had come.

“Just what did you come here for?”

All he could manage was tilt his head in confusion.

“What is he saying?”

“Ah, could it be that he doesn't understand what we're saying?”

“They spoke a different language in the past, didn't they?”

“Doesn't anyone speak old Forthorthe?”

“I know a little! I studied it together with my sister!”

“Good, then try talking to him!”

“Okay. Then... 'Nice to meet you, I am Myuraua.'”

However, amongst the children there was one girl who could speak a language Koutarou could understand. She was speaking old Forthorthe, the common language used 2,000 years ago. Having spent several months in the past, Koutarou had a somewhat decent understanding of the language. Having finally found a means to communicate, Koutarou responded in old Forthorthe.

“Hello Myuraua.”

“He understood it! He said hello!”

“Try talking some more to him!”

“Ask him if he's the real Blue Knight!”

“Okay, I'll try. 'Are you the Blue Knight?'”

“Hmm... I am the Blue Knight, but I am princess Theiamillis's Blue Knight.”

Koutarou honestly answered the question.

“It was hard for me to understand, but it seems like he really is the Blue Knight.”

But unfortunately, the girl's understanding was imperfect, and Koutarou's intentions weren't properly conveyed.

“It's the real one!”

“I told you!”

“Sorry.”

“I want to take a picture of the Blue Knight! I'll brag about it to everyone!”

“Me too! Myu, ask him!”

“Wait a second... 'You, us, make portrait!”

“Portrait?”

Koutarou was confused by the seemingly random word. But once he saw the small device one of the boys was pointing towards him, he understood its meaning.

I see. Picture wasn't a word back then.

The boy was holding a camera. It was a cutting edge camera from Forthorthe, but its shape and size was similar to the ones on Earth. He had also seen Theia and Clan use them, so he quickly realized that it was a camera.

“I don't really mind...”

Koutarou figured that the children only wanted to take a picture of the alien that had become Theia's vassal. He never suspected that the children, and the adults too, were completely convinced that he was the Blue Knight.

“'Thank you!'”

“Alright! We get to take a picture with the Blue Knight!”

“Give one to me later too!”

“Sure!”

“Line up!”

“'Blue Knight! Come!'”

“H-Hey.”

The girl that had spoken to Koutarou grabbed his hand and pulled him over to a more open area in the kitchen. The children were going to take a photo there. However.

On the way there, the girl came into contact with a shelf. Koutarou and the others had flung that shelf open so they could cook. Inside it was a lot of cooking utensils, and the impact from the girl coming into contact with the shelf threw several of the cooking utensils off balance, making them start to fall towards the girl. Since these included both sharp and heavy utensils as well, it was a disaster in the making.

“Look out!!”

Koutarou was the first to notice it and brought out the spiritual energy within him. Thanks to Sanae clinging onto him on a daily basis, the spiritual energy strengthened his body in an instant.

Five things are falling!!

A kitchen knife, a pot, a frying pan, a large platter and a bottle of alcohol.

Koutarou started by reaching his hand out towards the knife. Since the blade was faced down and the knife was falling straight towards the girl, it was the biggest danger.

Koutarou grabbed the grip of the knife with his right hand and punched the pot with his left.

The impact sent the pot flying in a direction away from the children. Since it was such a large pot, the impact and pain from punching it that hard would have been quite considerable. If Koutarou hadn't focused spiritual energy into his fist, he would surely have screamed out in pain.

Next is–!!

Koutarou then slammed the knife's grip at the frying pan.

The force behind the impact was enough to dent the frying pan and sent it crashing into the ceiling.

And finally–!!

All that was left were the large plate and bottle. Since they were now both directly above the girl's head, Koutarou didn't have the time to deal with them separately. Instead, he spun his body around and launched a kick.

Koutarou's leg passed just a few centimeters above the girl's head. At the same time, the plate and bottle collided with his leg. There was barely enough time, but thanks to the utensils colliding with his leg, their direction changed and fell onto the floor without so much as touching the girl.

The plate and bottle crashed into the floor and shattered. The remaining cooking alcohol left in the bottle splashed across the floor.

“Did I do it?!”

After finishing it up with a kick, Koutarou checked the girl in question for any injuries. The girl's eyes were wide open from surprise, but she seemed unharmed.

“... Phew... You don't seem to be hurt...”

After confirming that she was okay, Koutarou dropped his shoulders from relief. He then returned the knife in his hand to the shelf and fixed it firmly in place, making sure that it wouldn't fall again even if someone bumped into the shelf.

Once Koutarou closed the shelf, the sound of it returned the children who had been standing perfectly still to their senses.

“Did you see that...?”

“I did... but I couldn't see it...”

“But. Even if we couldn't see it... there's no doubting it...”

“Yeah. This person is definitely the Blue Knight...”

“It looked like a cartoon I saw the other day.”

“Hey, did you get that on video?”

“Probably. I was recording from the start.”

“Give me a copy later.”

“Sure. Let's show everyone else. I bet they'll be surprised.”

Having witnessed Koutarou's power upfront, they were more overwhelmed by him than the girl's crisis. Even though they had been told that Koutarou

was the real Blue Knight before, it wasn't until this moment that they became fully convinced of it.

“'U-Uhm, Blue Knight, thank you for saving me...”

“Owowow, I messed up, I put too much strength in it!!”

However, the legendary person that had surprised the children and gained their respect recalled the pain from punching the pot and was too distracted to even notice their gazes.

Part 7

When Koutarou's cooking was brought into room 106, the girls got noisy. The food presented to them looked far more delicious than they had assumed.

“K-K-Koutarou! Did you really make this?! You didn't just let Ruth do it for you?!”

“Yeah, I made it.”

“You're lying! That's definitely a lie!!”

“Put some faith in me! Anyways, calm down Sanae. You're troubling Sanae-san.”

“Come back, Sanae-chan.”

“Ah, sorry.”

The most surprised of all was Sanae, who was so surprised she jumped out of her own body. However, her reactions weren't exaggerated. Apart from Kiriha, Clan, and Theia and Ruth who had been with him in the kitchen, everyone gathered around the table stared at the dishes in surprise.

Tonight's menu consisted of roasted chicken, bread and soup. They were very simple, but the smell from the chicken and herb sauce enticed their appetite. The bread looked very light and airy, and the stock from the soup that used the chicken's bones had come out well.

Consideration had clearly been put into all of the dishes. Since this was so different from the normally crude Koutarou, it was only obvious for everyone to be surprised.

“Fufu, Koutarou wanted to keep this part of him a secret too...”

Kiriha had a cheerful expression on her face.

“Kii, it looks like the parts we get to keep to ourselves are gradually decreasing.”

Clan on the other hand pouted slightly.

Kiriha and Clan knew of Koutarou's hidden talents such as cooking and cleaning. This was because they had seen him in the past. Since Clan in particular had been with him for a long period of time, she felt very strongly that only she knew what Koutarou was really like. That's why she felt exasperated every time a different part of Koutarou was revealed.

“...S-Sakuraba-senpai, Satomi-san can cook...”

Yurika was crying.

She was well aware of her low degree in girly skills. However, that was just amongst the girls, and she didn't think that she'd lose to a boy, especially not to someone who was normally as crude as Koutarou. However, now her absolute confidence had been shattered. She didn't think she could make something as delicious as what was placed in front of her.

“...J-Just how could I be of use to Satomi-san...?”

Since Yurika imagined she would be of some use to Koutarou through cooking, she couldn't do anything but cry at the scene in front of her.

“Nijino-san...”

While Harumi sympathized with Yurika, she was able to accept that Koutarou could cook.

“But... if you calm down and think about it, it's not strange for him to be able to cook.”

“... Why is that?”

“He's ardent about knitting, and he treasures the equipment he uses for baseball and insect hunting. So if a person like that had to cook, I think it's only natural for him to be good at it.”

Harumi could actually think of one more reason as to why Koutarou was able to cook so well.

Satomi-kun grew up in a motherless family... He must have had the groundwork for housework covered even before he went to Forthorthe...

However, that reason was far too sad to speak of. That's why Harumi pretended she didn't notice that and closed her mouth.

“Harumi, Harumi. Does that mean that someone who half-asses everything like Yurika would never be able to match Koutarou?”

“Uhm~~ that's~~”

“Sakuraba-senpai, could you please deny that right away~!”

Harumi found herself unable to deny Sanae's cruel words and Yurika's tears continued to pour out.

Part 8

Yurika wept bitter tears, however, that was only until dinner started. Once it was time to eat, her tears stopped and together with Sanae, she started stuffing her mouth. The two looked like they hadn't eaten anything in days.

“Come on now, both of you. If you keep eating like that, your stomachs will ache.”

Shizuka stopped eating her own food and worriedly watched the two.

“Ahm, nom nom, hahm.”

“Mham, hom nom, mm.”

Yurika and Sanae both answered, but with their mouths filled with food, it didn't make a lick of sense. But since neither of them showed any signs of slowing down, they were probably saying that they were fine or something of the sort.

“Geez... don't come crying to me later then...”

Shizuka smiled wryly before tearing her bread and putting a piece in her mouth. As she did, Maki who was sitting next to her gave her a pondering look.

“Kasagi-san, do you not like Satomi-kun's cooking?”

“That's not true.”

Shizuka shook her head. All of the dishes were delicious, and Shizuka liked the fluffy texture of the bread in particular.

“But... you don't seem to be eating a lot.”

Maki had noticed that Shizuka hadn't been touching a lot of the food. That's why she figured that she might not like the taste.

“Hahmn?”

“Mah?”

Hearing that, Sanae and Yurika stopped eating and turned to look at Shizuka. To Shizuka, it looked like they were offering to eat her portion as well. Figuring that this was a good chance, Shizuka began explaining.

“Actually, I've gone up in weight lately, so I was thinking of going on a diet.”

Shizuka had been worried about her weight for a while. When she walked on the floor it would creak from time to time. That had never been the case in the past, so she figured that she had gone up in weight and decided to go on a diet.

“A diet?”

That was an unfamiliar word to Maki who hadn't give much care to health and beauty in the past. To Maki who had grown up in the slums, getting fat was not a bad thing at all. If anything, it could be called a status for being rich. Maki had a slender build because she was devoting herself to battle, but the thought of losing more weight than necessary had never occurred to her.

“This is important, Aika-san. You might be wearing swimsuits in the coming season, right?”

“That... might be the case, yes.”

“If at that time, your flab sticks out, the person you love would lose interest in you.”

“... Swimsuits... Flab... The person I love...”

The feminine thought patterns in Maki's brain that had been dormant activated and began working.

That... wouldn't be very cute...

Maki looked down on her own body and reached that conclusion. Just like Shizuka said, she didn't have the courage to wear a swimsuit with flab sticking out in front of the person she loved. Then, for the first time in her life, she reached the possibility that the roasted chicken in front of her could be a sworn enemy. Facing its devilish temptation she shivered.

"Kasagi-san. I will diet too."

"I think that's for the best. It's good for your health too."

Having gained an ally, Shizuka was already making plans for their diet.

"... Kasagi-san, you say you've gotten fatter, but how much weight did you gain?"

Harumi stopped eating and looked at Shizuka. To her, it didn't look like Shizuka needed to go on a diet. Her complexion was healthy and her figure was beautiful. Truth be told, Shizuka's current figure was Harumi's ideal.

"I don't know yet. The scale is currently broken, like when I stand on it, it shows more than 200 kilos... That's why I'm going to go out and buy a new one tomorrow."

"Ahaha, let me know when you find out."

The sickly and thin Harumi always wanted to become like Shizuka. That's why she was interested in her fluctuating weight. Shizuka on the other hand wanted to become like Harumi.

"A diet huh..."

Listening in on the conversation, Theia touched her own body while deep in thought. Theia was a girl as well, so she was also concerned with her figure. Her childish body type was round in places, and she began thinking of joining in on the diet.

“Theia, you shouldn't do it.”

However, Koutarou was against it.

“Why?”

“Rather than worrying about your weight, you should worry about your height. Eat more and grow. If you go on a diet, you won't grow any taller than that.”

“Wha...”

Theia was speechless from Koutarou's strict opinion.

“It's too early for you to go on a diet. You should wait until you're at least as tall as Ruth-san.”

“Grrr, here I listen to what you say and what is this?! Just for whose sake do you think I was thinking I wanted to diet for?!”

Theia was thinking that those serving her would be happier with a cuter princess. And yet, her vassal was telling her that it was too early for her to become cuter.

“I get it, it's for the people, right? This is just my opinion, but I think the people would feel more at ease with a tall princess than a thin one.”

“Guh... y-you're right...”

However, with her citizens being brought up, she was unable to argue with him. Theia very reluctantly backed down. However, large tears formed in her eyes from her chagrin.

“...O-One day... one day I'll make this idiot eat his words...”

“I sympathize with your feelings, your highness.”

“I'll captivate with my sexy body one day. Until then, Ruth, you do something.”

“I will try my best.”

Ruth accepted with a bitter smile.

But truth be told, Ruth wasn't that confident. It was quite clear that when it came to a 'sexy body' that Ruth was no match for Kiriha. But even then, Ruth remained optimistic.

I can’t imagine Master’s opinion would change depending on a person’s figure...

The situation wasn't actually as bad as Theia imagined it to be. But taking it so seriously was one of Theia's cute sides. Knowing that, Ruth didn't say anything more, and simply watched over the irritated Theia.

Part 9

Once dinner was over, Shizuka's diet plans became more tangible, and all of the girls of room 106 decided to take part in it. Since they were all girls, they wanted to maintain their figures. It was going to be a diet consisting of both exercise and restrictions on eating.

Of course, since there were differences in health between them all, some wouldn't have any food restrictions, such as the sickly Harumi and the

short Theia. However, the both of them would take part in the exercises. That's because they thought it would be good for their health.

“Being a girl sure is a hassle...”

Being a guy, Koutarou didn't understand the subtleties of the girls' hearts. He simply thought it must be a lot of work as he watched over them from the side.

“Why are you acting like this has nothing to do with you? You're going to do it too, Satomi-kun.”

“Eh?! I have to join too?!”

“Isn't that obvious? There's no point in doing something like this if everyone doesn't join in.”

Since the day he began training with Ruth, Koutarou's weight had remained relatively the same. He had no need for a diet, but Shizuka was going to impose one on him anyways.

Oh well. Having everyone strive for the same goal does seem like fun...

However, Koutarou had no objections with joining. Being the only one left out would be boring, so enjoying it with everyone else was the correct choice.

That was when the low pitched voice of a man reached his ears.

“Can you hear me, Blue Knight?”

At the same time, the crest on the back of his hand began faintly glowing.

Since male voices were rare in room 106, Koutarou was surprised at first, but once he noticed the crest he quickly understood what was happening.

“Alunaya-dono, you’ve awakened.”

The one calling out to him was the dragon he had summoned the other day, the Fire Dragon Emperor, Alunaya. Back then, Alunaya had used up all of his energy and entered a dormant state for a while. Today, Alunaya had recovered enough to be able to talk to Koutarou.

“It seems I have caused you to worry. Forgive me.”

“Don’t think anything of it. You saved us after all.”

Koutarou could speak to Alunaya in his mind thanks to the crest on the back of his hand. That's why no one else could hear what they were saying. It was a discussion that not even Alunaya's host, Shizuka, could hear.

“But are you okay?”

“Yes, that was what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Is something the matter?”

Koutarou grew slightly uneasy. He began thinking that Alunaya had struck up a conversation with him because he had a serious problem.

“There is no need for worry. There are no problems with myself. Mary... that wasn’t it. The girl I am residing in... Shizuka I think it was. She is in no danger either. Everything will return to normal in a while.”

“I see...”

Koutarou was relieved.

He had been worried for Alunaya who had used up all of his magical power, and for Shizuka who had become the host for Alunaya. But fortunately, there was no need for worry.

“However, there is one minor problem.”

“And that is...?”

“It’s about the weight management that Shizuka is about to do... Diet I think she called it... It will fail without a doubt.”

“Eeeeeeeeeeeehh?!”

Surprised by Alunaya's unexpected words, Koutarou instinctively let out a cry of surprise. As he did, all of the eyes in the room gathered on him. They all wondered what was wrong.

“What's the matter, Satomi-kun?”

Shizuka, who was leading the discussion on dieting, served as the representative of the girls and asked Koutarou.

“N-No, it's nothing. Sorry for interrupting your discussion.”

“Really? Then that's good. So anyways...”

Koutarou hadn't offered a decent explanation, but the girls were so interested in dieting that they quickly forgot about him.

“... Geez...”

With the girls having lost interest in him, Koutarou let out a sigh of relief and began talking to Alunaya again.

“Sorry for startling you.”

“No, it was just so unexpected... So will landlord-san’s dieting really fail?”

“Yes. The reason for why Shizuka’s weight has increased is me.”

Adhering to Koutarou's request, Alunaya began explaining the situation.

Alunaya was so powerful that he had an effect on his surroundings even if he didn't do anything. Since that would be bad, he was normally using magic to neutralize the effects. It was thanks to this that nobody had noticed Alunaya who was inside of Shizuka for all this time. However, having used up the majority of his powers in the previous battle, Alunaya was no longer able to fully neutralize the effects on his surroundings.

"...and that's how it is."

"So landlord-san hasn't gone up in weight, it's just her surroundings that have become weird?"

"That's right. Because I can't correct the distortions in the space surrounding Shizuka it looks like she had gone up in weight."

"So, lowering her weight through dieting is..."

"Impossible. There's no way to lower her weight except waiting for me to regain my powers."

Shizuka hadn't gotten fatter, yet the space around her being distorted caused her weight to increase. Lowering her physical mass would have no effect on the distortion. That was why Alunaya had said that the dieting would fail.

"If we leave it like this, Shizuka will eventually notice the abnormality with her body. She'll probably find out the next time she gets on a scale. What do we do, Blue Knight?"

"T-That's bad! Do something!"

By summoning Alunaya, Koutarou had, strictly speaking, involved the unrelated Shizuka into the battle. He felt that it was his duty to make sure that Shizuka could live her life like normal.

That's why he hadn't told her about Alunaya. Nobody would be happy to learn that there was another creature inside of their body after all. That's why Koutarou needed to keep Alunaya a secret to protect Shizuka's everyday life.

Part 10

Koutarou's first problem was to keep Shizuka from getting on a scale. However, that had been resolved thanks to Clan's assistance, offering to take more accurate measurements with her spaceship. As a result, Shizuka put aside her goal of buying a new scale. Instead, she was given fake data for her weight, or rather her estimated original weight. Shizuka was currently using that data as a basis for her dieting plans. The crisis had been averted for now.

“Sorry for always causing you trouble.”

“You can say that again. Do you really only remember I exist when you have troubles?”

The only remaining problem was Clan's sulking on the other end of the communication device. Clan didn't like that she was recently seen only as a convenient woman. She puffed up her cheeks and sent a grudgeful glance at Koutarou.

“That said, I can't just casually offer princess Clariossa to go insect hunting. You're not Yurika you know?”

Clan was a princess of a galactic empire, and Koutarou was showing her consideration in his own way.

“That's a big mistake. I am not planning on treating you like a legend you know?”

“Then will you come if I invite you?”

“Of course. I am your partner, Clan. I have no way of being princess Clariossa around you anymore.”

“You know, you're a really great girl!”

Lately, Kenji hadn't been coming with Koutarou, so anyone willing to come with him held great meaning. And if that person was a girl, she would be like a goddess. Koutarou's eyes were shining as he looked at Clan with admiration.

“I would have liked you to notice that sooner too. Geez...”

“Sorry, sorry... Anyways, keep your weekends open during July and August. We'll be going all of summer.”

“I understand. I'll start thinking of insect traps.”

A smile returned to Clan's face.

Now that I think about it, it’s been awhile since we’ve been like this...

Clan recalled her time travelling together with Koutarou and was in a great mood. Clan loved her current life surrounded by many friends, but she couldn't resist the temptation of just her and Koutarou walking through the mountains. This was a considerable change for a girl who used to lock herself up in her laboratory.

“Thanks. But in the end, I'm just causing you trouble.”

“You can't call something like this trouble. Besides, if we show the children on the Blue Knight insects from this planet, they'll surely love it.”

“Clan... you...”

The children would love it. The words Clan had casually spoken squeezed Koutarou's heart. In the past, she wouldn't even have been able to constantly remember her citizens going through a difficult time. Clan who had obtained a nature befitting of a princess now looked as splendid of a royal as Theia did to Koutarou.

“What's the matter, why are you making a strange face?”

“It's nothing. I was just admiring her highness who was being more wonderful than normal today.”

“I-Idiot!”

Clan cut off her communication, thinking she was being teased.

“... I was being serious though...”

Truth be told, Koutarou was troubled. Koutarou was now Theia's vassal, but he also wanted to be of help to Clan. Since he couldn't have two lords, Koutarou had quite a troublesome problem.

“Still... This year I'll definitely catch a huge beetle.”

The problem with his lord wouldn't be solved right away.

But since Koutarou wanted to see the children and Clan smiling with joy, he decided to catch the biggest beetle he could find for them.

Part 11

There was no way that Clan would have any equipment for hunting insects, and Koutarou couldn't just have her without any since he was the one who invited her. So, Koutarou went to the mall with the intention of buying a net and a cage.

"... I'm sure Clan could come up with some invention for it... but insect hunting should be done with some feelings behind it."

Koutarou imagined that if Clan was serious, she could come up with some invention that would capture every beetle on the mountain. But he wanted her to swing a net around and get a proper feel for insect hunting. The children would probably respect her more that way too.

"... Clan is short, and doesn't have a lot of stamina... Maybe these ones made for children would be good. But she'd probably get angry if she found out... I need to make sure I remove the label before I give it to her..."

While thinking of Clan, Koutarou entered a toy shop looking for an insect catching net. Clan was a good girl, but just like Theia, she had a lot of pride. Consideration was needed to be made even when choosing insect catching nets.

"Oh?"

That was when Koutarou caught a glance of a familiar girl by the entrance. She hadn't noticed Koutarou inside and passed by the storefront. Her expression bothered him a little so he returned the net to the shelf and chased after her.

"Landlord-san!"

"Eh? ...Oh, Satomi-kun."

The person that turned around to Koutarou's call was Shizuka. However, her normally cheerful expression was nowhere to be seen. She was smiling, but it was a somewhat sad smile, different from her usual positive and bright one.

I can't say I like that kind of expression...

The only time those around Koutarou would show this kind of expression was when they were carrying some kind of problem. A recent example would be Theia, and the one that had left the biggest impression of was Alaia's. Koutarou couldn't just leave Shizuka be like that and he chased after her.

“Did something happen?”

“No, nothing at all.”

Shizuka shook her head while smiling. However, Koutarou couldn't accept it.

“It sure doesn't look like that to me.”

“It might look like it, but nothing has happened now. It happened several years ago...”

Shizuka showed what she was holding on both hands to Koutarou.

So... that’s what it is...

Shizuka was carrying a large bouquet, and if it was something that had happened several years ago, there wasn't that many possibilities left.

Part 12

The Kasagi Family Grave. That was what was written on the tombstone. Below it, Shizuka's ancestors rested in peace. This was Shizuka's destination. After placing down the bouquet and some incense, she put her hands together in front of the grave. Koutarou who was accompanying her followed her lead. Koutarou felt like he couldn’t leave Shizuka be, so he had come with her to the cemetery.

“... Thank you, Satomi-kun.”

After Koutarou had finished his prayer, Shizuka bowed deeply to him in gratitude.

“No, you are always helping me, keeping Corona House clean and easy to live in... so...”

“Thank you, I mean it. I'm sure... mom and dad would be happy.”

Shizuka looked up and smiled. But it was a sad smile, and tears were forming in her eyes.

Like the tombstone said, this was where Shizuka's family rested. That included Shizuka's parents who had passed away several years ago. And today was the anniversary of their death.

Part 13

After finishing her prayers, Shizuka continued facing the tombstone for a while. Koutarou figured that she had some talking to do with her parents, so he left her be and sat down on a bench besides the graveyard.

You can see Corona House from here...

The graveyard was at an elevated position, and the bench was placed by its edge. As a result, one could see most of the city from there, and right in the middle of that view was Corona House. Koutarou thought to himself that Shizuka's parents surely sat down on this bench and watched over her.

But still... she must feel pretty lonely...

Even though she might be watched over, she would still be lonely. Koutarou had memories of it as well. Losing someone in the family wasn't easy, even more so if it was both of her parents.

“You're wide open.”

As Koutarou was deep in thought, someone snuck up on him and launched a chop at him from behind. The chop struck Koutarou on the back of his head, but since there was absolutely no force behind it, it only gave him a slight impact.

“Ouch.”

“Fufufu, I wonder if I could have beat you if I had been serious.”

The person behind him was Shizuka. She had finished talking to her parents and had now come to Koutarou. Seeing his wide open back, she reached out mischievously.

“Hahaha, please spare me from that, landlord-san.”

“Don't worry. I wouldn't get serious with you.”

Shizuka circled around the bench with light steps and sat down next to Koutarou. When he looked at her, she had a happy smile.

“Why not?”

“Because if you leave the room, I'll be troubled. Financially.”

“That's quite a shrewd reason.”

“That's right. In order for a high schooler landlord to survive in this era, you need to be shrewd.”

Having finished her grave visit and gotten her feelings in order, Shizuka had regained some of her cheerfulness. However, it still wasn't as bright as normal. Koutarou thought it was his role to help her with that.

“Hahaha, I'm a little shocked.”

“Eh?”

“I didn't think you were like that in regards to money.”

“If I admitted that, it would be harder to collect rent.”

In truth, Shizuka felt a deeper connection to the residents of room 106 than just mere landlord and tenant. And she hoped they felt the same. But in order for her to survive, she needed to collect money from people like that too. But since that felt strange, she couldn't admit that they were more than landlord and tenant, on the surface at least.

“I see... Being a landlord sounds like a troublesome occupation.”

Shizuka's feelings reached Koutarou, and rather than take offense, he smiled at Shizuka.

“Really? I think it would be easier than being a legendary hero.”

“That person in question thinks of himself as a normal guy though.”

“Of course. While you might be called a hero, it's not something you can become just because you want to.”

“Isn't that the same for you? Normally you would just be a normal high schooler.”

“That... might be true...”

Shizuka's smile vanished as she turned back towards the graveyard. If her parents were still alive, Shizuka would just have been a normal high school girl.

“... How did you become a landlord?”

Why did Shizuka's parents die?

When posing that question, Koutarou refrained from directly asking. To be honest, he wanted to avoid the question entirely. But then, he would never be able to be of any real help to Shizuka. While it might have been insensitive, it was something he had to do.

“... We went on a trip as a family. And the boiler at the hotel we stayed at exploded. My parents were caught up in the fire that the explosion caused...”

Shizuka hadn't talked about her past with others that much. She didn't want their sympathy. But when Koutarou asked of it, she spoke about her past very naturally. That was because she knew about his past. She believed that he would understand without showing her any unwanted pity.

“... Mom and dad gave their lives to protect me. Dad was lost in the fire, and mom inhaled too much smoke... 'Don't take too many deep breaths', 'We will definitely protect you'... those were their last words that I could remember...”

Even though she believed Koutarou wouldn’t pity her, she still felt quite sad as she spoke. Her emotions swelled as her words gradually grew weaker.

“... I was so young, I couldn't do anything... I stayed rolled up in a wet blanket while mom and dad carried me. The body I had trained at the gym was useless. I was just a powerless child that could only be protected...”

Shizuka meekly mumbled as she clenched her right hand. She had never forgotten the helplessness she had felt on that day.

“That's why... I decided to become stronger. I don't ever want to be that helpless again. I’ll protect what mom and dad had protected...”

That's why Shizuka protected Corona House that her parents had left behind. She would properly manage it as a landlord, and make sure no accidents or fires ever occurred. She trained her body to be able to protect others from any other incident, so that her tenants wouldn't have to experience what she had gone through. In other words, Shizuka was more concerned about her tenants than money.

“... No wonder we didn't stand a chance.”

Koutarou mumbled and smiled wryly. He couldn't keep himself from smiling.

“Eh?”

“I'm talking about when we first came to room 106. Back then, you crushed all of us.”

“Ah... something like that did happen, didn't it...”

“Unlike us who were just fighting over the room, you had a proper reason to want to protect it. So of course we wouldn't have a chance against you.”

Koutarou was convinced. It was only natural for Shizuka to be so strong. She had a proper reason to fight from the very start. So Koutarou and the others, who had fought only for themselves, were never a match to begin with.

“But it's strange. Now I want to protect all of you too.”

Shizuka showed her own small wry smile while staring into her palms. How strange. She now wanted to protect those people she had thrown her fists at.

“I think I know what you mean.”

“Now that I think about it, Satomi-kun, you have similar circumstances to me.”

They had both lost family, fought against outsiders to protect their place, and now we're trying to protect those outsiders. Koutarou and Shizuka were quite similar.

“If you put it like that, everyone might be the same.”

“That's true... Everyone just wanted their own place...”

Everyone sought out room 106 for their own reasons. Yet everyone had obtained what they wanted. Even though the reasons they had come for were different, the root was the same. Everyone struggled, searching for warmth and a place to call their own.

“Then the reason we are all together is all thanks to you.”

“To me?”

“Yes. It's because you are protecting Corona House that we could all get along.”

“I... brought everyone...”

Shizuka had never thought of things like that. She put her hands on her chest with her eyes wide open.

“I'm sure your parents would be happy.”

“Would they really? Mom and dad...”

“Yes. At least... I think they would.”

“... Thank you, Satomi-kun. I am very happy too...”

Shizuka had struggled ever since the day she lost her parents. And in this past year, she had found her place again. What she had lost in the past and sought after was now all around her, within reach. That's why—

The tears now flooding out from Shizuka's eyes had been dammed up for a long time.

Part 14

Shizuka didn't stop crying until the sun had begun to set and the cityscape was being dyed orange.

“I'm sorry, Satomi-kun. I've kept you waiting for a long time...”

Having returned to normal, Shizuka hurriedly wiped her tears away. However, that didn't wipe it all away, so Koutarou gently reached out with his hands to wipe away the rest.

“It's fine. I think you should be allowed to cry when visiting your parents' grave.”

“Ah...”

Shizuka was surprised by the warmth coming from Koutarou's hand on her cheek. The thought of rejecting it didn't cross her mind at all, because that warmth was one of the things she desired.

“Besides, if we went home with you still crying, there might be a riot.”

“That... might be, true...”

However, Shizuka began feeling something different from that warmth.

Shizuka had come into contact with Koutarou countless times before through exercising and practicing. It was because she trusted Koutarou that she had never thought much of it.

Something's strange...

However, that wasn't the case now. The warmth touching her cheek gave her a sense of fullness and security that she had never felt before. She began feeling that if she entrusted herself to this warmth, she would surely find happiness.

It's not like something's supposed to have changed...

It wasn't like something had changed on the surface. Shizuka and Koutarou were still the same as they always had been. But the vague feeling that Shizuka had been feeling deep inside changed into conviction.

Koutarou understood what Shizuka treasured, and he would treasure them with her.

That was what Shizuka now believed. It was a slight change, and it had sparked from a small chat. It might just be obvious, but feeling that small difference completely changed Shizuka.

A wish to be happy, expectations of the future, an elevated heart rate and unsettling feelings.

Something Shizuka had never felt before bloomed inside of her, growing ever larger. She had a vague understanding of what that feeling was. Since she loved gossip so much, she wasn't so thickheaded that she wouldn't notice. But she couldn't so easily accept it. Like Koutarou, when it came to herself, she became a lot more timid.

"T-That's right, Satomi-kun, there's something I want to ask you."

Mustering all of her remaining will, she pretended to be normal. Fortunately, this succeeded and Shizuka was able to talk to Koutarou like she always did. Of course, whether that really was fortunate or not is up to discussion.

“Sure, what is it?”

Koutarou didn't hesitate to agree. He also didn't think Shizuka seemed off. It was only obvious for one to be a little shaken up from visiting a grave.

“Uhm... actually, I kind of want you to give Aika-san some attention.”

“Aika-san? That's true... she probably still hasn't gotten used to her new life.”

“It's not just that...”

Shizuka shook her head. By now she had returned to her usual self. It was something she had struggled to bring up, but she was really worried.

“Satomi-kun, do you remember the other day when Aika-san wanted you to place a curse on her?”

“Yes. While it was to deceive the enemy, that sure did surprise me.”

The other day, Maki had asked Koutarou to deprive her of her freedom. If they did indeed do so, they would be able to fool Darkness Rainbow. But because the means she had mentioned were too dangerous, they decided to fool them using a different way.

“Actually, Aika-san had one more hidden objective.”

“Another objective? What would that be?”

“Aika-san was originally an orphan... and Darkness Rainbow was the only place she belonged to. She's now left them and come to stay with us, but she still hasn't gotten her feelings in order.”

Maki was currently sharing room 206 with Shizuka. The two sympathized with each other’s circumstances and shared a lot between each other. That's why Shizuka understood Maki's feelings better than anyone else.

“That's why Aika-san wanted a bond with someone so obvious anyone can tell.”

“So she wanted me to put a curse on her? Surely there should be a better way?”

Koutarou was surprised. If it was like what Shizuka had said, Maki wanted to create bond by carving it into her body. That was far too violent of a method.

“She is so helplessly lonely, so she wants any kind of connection she could get.”

Maki was lonely. Only a short amount of time had passed since she came to stay with Koutarou. While she believed in Koutarou and the others, she would still often feel insecure.

Was it okay for her to be here? Was she needed? Was she unwanted?

Maki was worried about a lot. That's why she wanted a bond that would let her deny those worries, even if it meant living with a gun pointed to her head. Having the muzzle pointed at her would serve as proof that she was there. Maki wanted to sense a connection to others through abandoning her own freedom.

“Doesn't that ring a bell to you, Satomi-kun? … It does to me...”

“... Yeah... it does to me too...”

Koutarou had felt something similar when he had lost his mother and when his relationship with his father turned sour. He devoted himself to fighting others, and through harming himself he felt like he still existed. What he did was the same as what Maki was doing now.

“Aika-san needs someone to save her from that. Just accepting her isn't enough.”

“... To me, it had been baseball and Mackenzie...”

What saved Koutarou from his lifestyle was his baseball team and his meeting with Kenji. By working together with his team towards a goal, he was able to affirm his existence. And right now, that was what Maki needed. Koutarou understood very well what Shizuka was talking about.

“It might be the same reason as to why Aika-san is always after your money. She wants to be able to feel safe through an easy to understand bond like money.”

“Aika-san...”

When Shizuka pointed that out, Koutarou recalled when he and Maki had formed a contract. Deep inside, Maki was a lonely girl shivering inside of a dungeon. And like Koutarou was, Maki wouldn't rely on others directly, even if she wanted to.

“So Satomi-kun. I want you to help Aika-san until she can properly settle in.”

“... Everyone wants a place of their own, huh...”

Koutarou had felt like he had saved Maki just by taking her with him to room 106. But that alone wasn't enough. If left be, she would spend a lot of

her life in anxiety. They would be very painful days. It was a problem that might eventually be resolved even if he left her be, but Koutarou couldn't find it in him to do that.

“Please, Satomi-kun. We don't need to protect just Aika-san's place, but everyone else's too...”

“Everyone else's... I see. You're right...”

Creating a place for Maki to remove her insecurity was the same as making a place where everyone could live and laugh together. That meant protecting everyone's place. It wasn't just for Maki's sake, but for everyone's.

“I understand... I'll think of something.”

Koutarou decided to listen to Shizuka's request. He still didn't know what he should do, but he wanted to be mindful of it. If he was, he believed he would eventually find a solution.

“Thank you, Satomi-kun.”

With Koutarou showing that he understood, tears began forming in Shizuka's eyes again. He had done exactly what she wanted, which made it hard for her to keep her feelings of joy at bay.

How troubling... I thought I was trying to hide these feelings...

The conversation she had brought up to change topic had in the end led to the same place. Shizuka's plan appeared to have misfired. But it might be that this would have happened regardless of what she spoke of. Her expectations of the future and rapidly beating heart convinced her that she would be happy as long as she was with Koutarou.

“... Could I borrow your shoulder?”

“Sure.”

There, Shizuka decided to stop going against her own feelings. Even if she did, it would have the same results. In that case, she might as well just accept them. She also believed that Koutarou would accept her, even like that.

“Landlord-san... you're crying again.”

A large hand wiped away the tears on her cheeks.

Now that I think about it, dad’s hand was like this...

Shizuka accepted the sensation of fullness and security that was transmitted to her through that large hand.

“... Fufufu... dad, mom, Aika-san, and everyone too... I have a lot to worry about...”

Shizuka entrusted herself to the feelings inside and to the passing of time. As she did, everything she had bottled up, all of her frozen feelings slowly melted and were swept away somewhere. Shizuka had regained the innocent and calm mind that she had when she was with her parents.

Dad, mom... don’t worry about me. I have Satomi-kun and everyone else with me. I’m fine. I am happy now...

Shizuka now understood who she should be with to be happy. Where the place she belonged to was. They were things that Shizuka had been looking for ever since she lost her parents.

“Landlord-san.”

“Hmm...What?”

While entrusting herself to the happiness she had finally found, Shizuka looked up at Koutarou with a hazy glance. At first, the boy was just supposed to be another tenant. But before she knew it, he had taken up a position in the middle of what she treasured.

“This is just hypothetical, but... if we paid several decades of rent in advance, and landlord-san could live like a normal girl again, would you be able to smile?”

“...Satomi-kun...”

And now that boy was trying to guide Shizuka herself into that center. He was saying that there was no need to just watch.

I see... so that’s what this is...

Up until now, Shizuka had wondered: ‘Why did she fall in love with Koutarou?’ But she could understand now. Koutarou filled up the empty place in Shizuka's heart. And she could fill up the empty place in his. Everyone was attracted to one another because they believed that they needed each other. So in a word, everyone wanted a place where they belonged.

“Fufu, Satomi-kun, let me tell you something good.”

“Eh?”

“There's an easier and cheaper method to paying rent upfront.”

“And that is?”

“I can't tell you the method. That's something you have to realize yourself, or there won't be any point... fufufu...”

Shizuka smiled and leaned on Koutarou's shoulder.

She had her own pride.

That method was something Koutarou had to find for himself.

Part 15

With the summer ever approaching, the sun began to set later and later in the evening. Since waiting for the sun to set would take too long, Koutarou and Shizuka decided to leave a little bit earlier before it happened.

“By the way, why were you in the mall, Satomi-kun?”

“I was there to buy a new insect catching net and the likes.”

Shizuka's expression was as bright as it normally was. However, Shizuka was a bit more talkative than normal and would rely on Koutarou from time to time. Koutarou figured that was because she was feeling lonely after visiting her parent's grave.

“Then did Maximilian break? Was it Yurika?”

“It's not like that. Clan will be coming along too, so I wanted to get some equipment ready for her as well.”

“Hmm. You sure are treasuring Clan-san a lot, Satomi-kun.”

Shizuka showed a cheeky smile and poked Koutarou with her elbow.

“That's not really my...”

“Not really your intention?”

“Well, it is... but in that sense, I value everyone as well.”

“Then if I join, will you prepare equipment for me too?”

“Well... I would.”

Koutarou felt like something would be wrong if he prepared equipment for Clan but not Shizuka. If she was going, it would only be proper for him to prepare equipment for her as well.

“Fufu~, Satomi-kun, isn't there something you want to ask me?”

Shizuka took a few steps in front of Koutarou, spun around and walked backwards as she smiled. That teasing smile looked like that of a child playing a prank on their parents.

“... Landlord-san, would you like to come insect hunting too?”

Having an idea of what Shizuka was after, Koutarou honestly answered her expectations. The feelings one usually had for one's family was now being directed towards the nearby Koutarou. Knowing that, he couldn't find it in him to refuse her.

“Of course. Aika-san will be coming too, right?”

“Yes, it's as you say, my lady. I was thinking of taking her with me even if I have to be pushy.”

“Then I'll come with you. Ufufufu.”

If Koutarou had learned of Shizuka's true intentions he probably would have been surprised.

Shizuka was indeed feeling a little lonely because she couldn't rely on her parents anymore. But she didn't see Koutarou as a substitute. She simply wanted to rely on him for who he was.

Unaware of those intentions, Koutarou paid attention to the strength he could feel from her words.

Landlord-san really is strong... If she’s this strong, then maybe I don’t need to hide it from her...

Despite having just visited her parent's grave, Shizuka hadn't forgotten to take Maki into account. Sensing that strength of heart, Koutarou began thinking that there might not be any reason to hide Alunaya's existence from her.

Shizuka would be able to accept Alunaya. This situation wasn't anything like the time he kept his visit to the past Forthorthe a secret from Theia. Even if Shizuka found out, it wouldn't have any political implications. That's why Koutarou began leaning towards telling Shizuka everything.

But, how should I tell her? She'll probably be shocked. I should check with Clan first...

While Koutarou wanted to tell her, he couldn't just reveal it haphazardly. But fortunately, Shizuka would be joining Koutarou and Clan on their insect hunting. He was going to talk to Clan, and if possible, reveal it to her then.

"What's wrong, Satomi-kun? You have such a serious expression. Ah, could it be that you're having a hard time financially?"

Seeing Koutarou fall silent, Shizuka began thinking that she had made an unreasonable request. Since that was unintentional, her smile withered away at a rapid pace.

"I'm sorry for kinda forcing you. We don't need equipment, we only need to tag along."

"No, it's not like that..."

Koutarou hurriedly began thinking of a proper reason.

While it was true that he had fallen silent, he still couldn't tell her the real reason why. It wasn't like he was struggling financially, and he didn't want Shizuka to needlessly worry.

By the way, Koutarou currently had money to spare. Having become master and servant, Theia rejoiced and wanted to give Koutarou a salary. On top of that, Theia loved the feeling of their master-servant relationship.

“... We'll be going out a lot during the summer, so I was just wondering if you and Aika-san will be okay.”

“If anything, that's more convenient. I think it's better if Aika-san gets something like a routine.”

“Landlord-san...”

While it was something Koutarou had brought up to hide his true intentions, Shizuka's generosity ended up being highlighted.

She really is amazing... I really should tell her the truth as soon as possible...

In just one day, Koutarou's impression of Shizuka had greatly changed. As a result, Koutarou's decision to reveal everything was strengthened.

While Koutarou made up his mind, Shizuka had unexpectedly stopped walking.

“What's that I wonder...”

The stationary Shizuka stared straight forward.

“What's the matter?”

Noticing that Shizuka had stopped, Koutarou followed suit. Shizuka pointed at something a little up ahead and to the right.

“Satomi-kun, look over there. Doesn't that look like smoke?”

“It does. Maybe someone is making a campfire?”

Smoke was rising from the direction that Shizuka had indicated. Seeing that, Koutarou figured that someone might just be making a campfire. But the season was still not summer yet, so it wasn't a period to be making

campfires. On top of that, the smoke rising was pitch black. It wasn't the kind of smoke that was created from campfires.

“No, that's not a campfire!! This is the middle of a residential district!! Who would set up a campfire here?!”

“Is it a fire?!”

By the time Koutarou spoke that word, Shizuka was already running. Having been distracted by the smoke, he hadn't noticed that right away, and was therefore unable to stop her.

Part 16

The place that was on fire was right in front of where Koutarou and Shizuka were. The site was an old private house, three stories tall, and even though it had only just started burning, it was already wrapped in searing flames. Because of the wind growing stronger with the evening and because the house was made out of wood, it burst into flames incredibly quickly.

“Satomi-kun, call the fire department!”

“Okay!”

When Koutarou and Shizuka arrived, there was still no fire truck at the site, and no one was fighting the fire. Onlookers were only just starting to gather, and it was doubtful if the fire department had been contacted or not. So the first thing they did upon arriving was to contact the fire department using their cellphones to report the fire.

“Hello, is this the fire department?! There's a fire!!”

“Satomi-kun, someone is coming out!! I'll leave this to you!!”

“Landlord-san?! Ahh, sorry, the address is—”

Two people appeared from the entrance of the burning house. They were an elderly couple, and they slowly edging forward while supporting each other. Shizuka approached the burning house in an attempt to help them, leaving the reporting to Koutarou.

The flames were strong, and just moving closer, Shizuka felt like she was being roasted.

Dad, mom...

Shizuka had felt that sensation before. The heat she felt now was exactly like the heat she had felt in the fire where she had lost her parents. Partially because of that, Shizuka's parents overlapped with the elderly couple that had appeared.

“Are you okay?!”

Having run up to the two, Shizuka reached out to them and moved them to a safe place.

I wonder if mom and dad looked like this... when they were carrying me...

As she did, Shizuka was captivated by their appearance. They were covered in soot and sweat, and they looked exhausted. Shizuka couldn't ignore them.

“O-Our granddaughter is still inside!!”

“Please tell the firefighters!!”

“Eh…?”

However, Shizuka returned to herself when she heard what they said. The next moment, a faint voice reached her ears.

“... Papa! Mama! Grandpa! Grandma!”

Shizuka looked in the direction of the voice and spotted a young girl on the third floor, desperately beating on the window with tears in her eyes as the flames grew closer.

“Yuuka!”

“Yuu-chan! It's okay, the fire fighters are coming to save you!”

Having noticed the same voice, the elderly couple screamed out.

They won’t make it!

Based on the strength of the fire, the girl wouldn't make it if they just waited for the firefighters to come. That much was obvious, even to an amateur.

“Oh no, wait young lady!”

“You shouldn't place your own life in danger!”

Having just finished talking to the fire department, Koutarou heard the old couple's shouts and turned to look towards the burning house, expecting the worst.

“Landlord-san, no, wait!!”

What Koutarou saw was Shizuka's back as she rushed into the burning house.

Part 17

Shizuka was aware of the foolishness of her actions. Normally, she probably wouldn't have chosen this method. But today, she stepped inside the burning building.

Dad, mom... I am no longer a helpless child!

The elderly couple and the young girl reminded Shizuka of her parents and herself. Shizuka's parents had stepped through flame to protect her, and they had died saving Shizuka. If she had been able to do something back then, the outcome might have been different. That was what Shizuka always thought. That's why she trained her body and continued protecting Corona House. But there was no way to confirm that was actually true. That kind of thought would pop into her mind from time to time and cause her to waver.

But now, a sight similar to the fire of the past was in front of her. Shizuka thought of it as a chance to test whether a different outcome was possible or not. If she was able to save the girl inside, she would be able to confirm that she was no longer helpless. She should be able to reach an outcome different from the past now.

That's why Shizuka, despite knowing that her actions were foolish, stepped into the burning building. The fact that the fire trucks wouldn't make it here in time pushed her forward. This wasn't purely out of good intentions; Shizuka wanted to retake the past she had lost.

The third floor! I have to get up to the third floor!

Having entered the house, Shizuka began looking for stairs up to the next floor. Since the girl was on the third floor, that was her fastest path there.

There's so much smoke... and it's so hot...

Shizuka quickly realized that it wouldn't be that easy. Her view was blocked by the rising smoke and flames. Since smoke had a tendency to flow upwards, it hid the stairs. Surrounded by flames, she began feeling the mental pressure. With this being the house of someone she had never met before, finding the stairs proved exceptionally challenging.

Calm down, Shizuka. This is a house, the stairs should be in a suitable place!

Shizuka attempted to calm herself down as she took step after step into the hallway. In small houses, the stairs would often be right by the entrance. But in big houses like this, the stairs were usually placed in a position where they couldn't be seen from the entrance. That said, the stairs should still be connected to the hallway for the sake of convenience. The stairs should just be nearby. Shizuka subdued her panic and continued her search.

There they are!

Her efforts paid off and Shizuka found the stairs right around the corner of the hallway. Since smoke was rising up through the stairs, it was impossible to tell what kind of situation the upper floor was in. Shizuka suppressed her urge to rush up, and carefully proceeded upwards, step by step. Halfway up, she spotted several books lying on the stairs. If she had run up, she most likely would have stepped on them and been in danger.

To think smoke was this hot...

A large amount of smoke continued pouring up, practically blinding Shizuka. It permeated through her eyes and caused tears to form. Shizuka slowly crawled up to the second floor while paying close attention to her footing.

"*cough* *cough*"

Having inhaled some smoke as she reached the second floor, Shizuka had a violent coughing fit. That caused her to inhale even more smoke, and caused a vicious spiral. The second floor had denser smoke than the first, especially by the stairs.

I need to stay low...

Shizuka was close to panicking as she was having a hard time breathing, but she barely managed to keep her cool. She put the knowledge she learned from fire drills to use and stayed low to the ground, which somehow allowed her to breathe normally.

I have to get to the third floor...

She took several deep breaths and calmed herself down. As she did, she was able to tell what kind of situation the second floor was in. The fire was more intense here than on the first floor. This was only natural as both flames and smoke moved upwards, which of course meant that the third floor was even worse than this. Shizuka prayed that the fires hadn't spread too far as she hurried to save the girl.

I have... slight burns. But other than, that I'm fine! I can still move!

As she had worked her way up, Shizuka had been burned in several places. That was unavoidable as she was in the middle of a fire. After confirming that she was still okay, Shizuka began moving to climb up the stairs to the third floor. Since the stairs continued from the second floor, there was no need to look for them. However, that was when Shizuka stopped.

The stairs are burning!

The fire had already spread to the stairs leading up to the third floor. In order to reach the next floor, she would need to cross through these flames. Since it was only partially burning, it should be possible to cross by moving quickly.

I see, so that's why that old couple...

But for an elderly couple, pushing their way past this would be difficult. They had no choice but to give up on saving their granddaughter through their own hands because of this.

But I can do it!

Determination flared up in Shizuka's eyes as she backed away from the stairs. She then lowered her posture and took a few deep breaths. She was going to hold her breath and dash up to the third floor.

Shizuka was confident in her own movements. She should be able to move around better than an average man. The same was true for her lung capacity. Unlike the powerless child she had been when her parents had died. Shizuka believed that she could do something now.

Here I go!

She held her breath and charged up the stairs. Only a few dozen centimeters of the stairs were actually burning. If she could accelerate enough to dash right past it, there shouldn't be any problems.

Uhh!

While it was just for a moment, her body was surrounded by large flames, causing Shizuka's expression to contort with pain. But that was all that faltered. Shizuka maintained her balance and ran up the rest of the stairs. Like that, Shizuka was able to reach the third floor.

"...Haah, haah, haah... I-I should take skirts into consideration as well..."

Having reached the top floor, Shizuka crouched down and took several deep breaths. While it had only been a few seconds, her body demanded oxygen after that intense action.

But, now I can save that girl...

It was hard to breathe and the places where she had been scorched hurt. But Shizuka had managed to reach the third floor. Her goal was now within reach. She would be able to save that young girl now.

Dad, mom, are you watching? I've gotten stronger...

Strictly speaking, what Shizuka was trying to save wasn't the girl, but her helpless self.

Here we go, Shizuka... It's just a little more to go!!

Shizuka poured strength into her arms and pushed herself up. Next, she put strength into her legs and tried to lift her body. She remembered the room the girl had been in. As long as she could stand, she could reach the room within a few seconds. The finish line was right in front of her.

H-huh…?

But Shizuka couldn't stand up. She lost her vision and strength left her lower body. Shizuka who was leaned forward, tried to stand up, but fell back down towards the floor. She tried moving her arms to support her body, but she couldn't do that either and she crashed into the floor.

Why…? I should still... be able to continue...

Shizuka's conscience began fading away. But that wasn't because she had slammed into the floor. She was in a state of hypoxia.

There was a severe lack of oxygen in a fire to begin with. And on top of that, there was a lot of particles in the air, carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide, obstructing her breathing. This was especially true for the third floor. However, Shizuka expected that and had been careful. She stayed low and took shallow breaths, while keeping her heart from pumping too fast. That

lowered the consumed oxygen, so she should still have been okay for a while longer.

However, Shizuka had forgotten to take one thing into account: the fire burning on the stairs leading to the third floor. She had been so focused on breaking through the flames that she had forgotten everything she was being careful about. In order to rush up, she required a lot of oxygen. Expending the majority of the oxygen she kept inside, she needed to inhale a lot of air. However, the air on the third floor was bad and contained a lot of harmful particles. As a result, Shizuka was unable to replenish the oxygen she had used and entered a state of hypoxia.

Shizuka had indeed grown. She had a sturdy body and a quick wit. She was no longer like the powerless child she had been several years before. But she couldn't do anything about the fact that she was just a human in the end.

My body... won't move.. I couldn't... do anything again... Will I... die like this... unable to do anything...?

As her consciousness faded, she was overcome by the feeling of helplessness. She had worked so hard, but in the end, she couldn't do anything. A different outcome didn't exist.

It shouldn't have... ended like this... No... I don't want this...

Shizuka tried her best to move, but her body which was now in full blown hypoxia didn't budge an inch.

Why... why am I this weak...? If only I had more power... at least the power to protect the ones I love...

It felt painful. She felt mortified. Tears streamed out of Shizuka's eyes. Her body couldn't move, but only the tears she didn't wish for continued to flow. And as the first tear fell onto the floor–

"Girl, can you hear me?"

–somebody's voice reached Shizuka's ears. But it hadn't reached her as a sound. She currently couldn't hear anything around her.

Who...?

Not even in a condition where she could understand the bizarre situation that was developing, Shizuka responded to the voice. As she did, the owner of the voice began talking in a powerful yet calm manner.

"Hear me, girl. 2,000 years ago, in a certain country there was a great princess. Her country was endangered, yet she had overcome that crisis using only the talent, the power, she had."

What a strong person...

Shizuka praised the princess. A person that could protect an entire country was strong. It was someone who Shizuka strived to be like.

"That's correct. While it wasn't strength visible to the eye, she held a powerful strength within."

Strength didn't exist solely as a physical phenomenon. It could also be the wisdom to see through others, the power of money or knowledge in medicine. The power the princess in question had was the power to attract others to her and lead them to the future. The strength of a ruler.

"However, that was what made her unhappy as well."

Unhappy...? Even though she had such strength...?

"That's right. Having strength means that you can do everything yourself. You wouldn't need any help. The girl was too great of a princess. That's why, while she had been able to save her country, she was unable to be with the man she loved, and quietly lived out the rest of her life in solitude."

She was always alone...? Poor princess...

"A strong power will isolate you. Girl, the same goes for you. If you grow stronger than you are now, you will cross the limits of man. That strength would surely isolate you. That is the price to pay for power."

Solitude... the price for strength...

The larger the power, the more unhappiness it brings. Money was a good example. Upon obtaining a large amount of money, the people around calling themselves friends of family will increase. Forcing you to doubt others. Eventually you would become suspicious of your true friends. Leading you to a lonely life.

"If you so desire, I can grant you my strength. The strength to protect the ones you love from any misfortune."

I want it. Of course I do.

"However, that will make you unhappy. You would have to give up a normal life. It would mean turning your back on becoming one with the person you love, giving birth to a child and raising it. Do you desire my strength even then?"

The strength the owner of the voice had was the power to defeat your enemies. If she obtained it, she would be thrown into a world of battles, whether she wanted to or not. That was a life far too different from the life of a normal high school student. The owner of the voice thought of that kind of life as an unhappy one.

Yes. It would be convenient.

However, Shizuka thought of it differently. She thought that not being able to live a normal life was convenient. That it was a good thing.

"Convenient you say?"

The owner of the voice was puzzled by that unexpected answer. Shizuka happily talked to the puzzled owner of the voice.

That's right. The people I love all have strong powers. And just like you say, they are lonely. Satomi-kun is the loneliest of them all. He's the strongest, but also the loneliest. In order to support him, I would need to be strong enough to be able to walk with him, side by side. That's why I'll become lonely or whatever it takes. In this world, there are those you can't support unless you do...

"...I understand. It's because of that heart of yours that you drew me in..."

The owner of the voice wasn't talking to Shizuka through sheer chance. It had chosen a person with a suitable heart that it could entrust with its power. Upon hearing Shizuka's words, the owner of the voice understood why she had such a heart, and it rejoiced that it hadn't been wrong.

Eh? What do you mean?

But since Shizuka wasn't aware of those circumstances, she was confused by the voice.

"It's nothing. It's just... if the princess of the sword could think like you, she might have led a happy life."

Isn't happiness just all about the situation and mood?

If one had a strong power, they would most likely be unhappy if they lived among normal people. But that might not be the case if they lived with

other people with powers. Shizuka believed that power itself couldn't determine if one would be happy or not.

"Well said. You really are the poster child for strength."

Is that a compliment?

"It is indeed. It is the highest degree of praise from me."

Okay then...

Supposedly it was a compliment, but it didn't feel like one to Shizuka. It's possible that it wasn't meant to be a compliment for a girl. With that in her mind, the small doubt and dissatisfaction she was feeling didn't go away.

That might be true for—

Shizuka wanted to ask a little the owner the voice for the specifics, but halfway through her sentence she realized something important.

That's right, I still haven't heard your name. I am Shizuka. Who are you?

Shizuka still didn't know who she was talking to. That's why she casually asked, but the answer she received was something completely unexpected.

"My name is Alunaya."

Eh?! You mean the one that appears in the legends of Theia-chan's country?!

Shizuka was taken back by surprise. She was so surprised that her clouding consciousness that was fading away from hypoxia cleared up for a moment.

"That's right. I am the ruler of the fire dragons, the Fire Dragon Emperor Alunaya. Shizuka, I will entrust you with my power. You may use that overwhelming power to protect what you wish. Then let us start!"

Ah, w-wait a minute!! I still have so much to ask!!

The huge power that had been hidden inside of her wrapped around Shizuka. That power pressed its surroundings and swelled up, greatly changing Shizuka's fate. She was given the power to protect those which she held dear. Or it might be a power to let her draw closer to someone in solitude. Rather than pure power, it might have been Shizuka's hopes. Because in the end, everyone wanted a place of their own.

Like that, Shizuka chose to coexist with the dragon of legend.

Part 18

Once Koutarou reached the third floor, wearing his armor, he could only see a sea of flames.

“Where is landlord-san?! Find her!!”

Koutarou worried that too much time may have passed as he ordered the artificial intelligence in his armor.

Since Koutarou's armor was an equipment designed for a spaceship, it functioned like a space suit. That's why he could move around a burning building without any problems, as long as it wasn't for too long. But the same wasn't true for Shizuka and the girl that had been left behind. He had to find them before they both died.

“Life reactions detected. They number two, four meters away in the ten o'clock direction.”

“Well done! Let's–”

“The reactions are approaching. Warning, confirmed the generation of a shockwave. Deploying distortion field.”

“Uwah?!”

But before Koutarou could find her, Shizuka had already appeared in front of him. The entire door and frame were blown away right in front of him. On the other side of it was Shizuka, holding the girl in question.

“Landlord-san?!”

“I'm sorry Satomi-kun, I wasn't able to properly control my strength. Are you okay?”

“I'm fine, the armor protected me.”

Since Shizuka's arms were being used to hold the unconscious girl, she blew the door away using a shockwave sent out from her mouth. Koutarou had been on the other side, but fortunately he was wearing his armor and the barrier protected him. If not, both him and the wall behind him would have been blown away.

“But landlord-san, you look...”

“Ah, this? Uncle Alu saved me. But let's talk about that later! We should get out of here!”

“I understand!”

Koutarou was surprised by Shizuka's appearance, but he obediently followed her instruction. He could roughly imagine what had happened to her. Shizuka's eyes were glowing red, there was a horn on her forehead, large wings on her back and a long tail on the back of her waist. It was a sight he had seen before, and proof that Alunaya's powers were in effect.

Part 19

Having safely met up, Koutarou and Shizuka delivered the girl to the elderly couple and quickly left the scene of the fire behind them. While they had been able to save the girl, the fact that they had rushed into the building

without waiting for the firefighters to arrive was a big problem. So the two decided to head home before they got into trouble.

“... Give me a break, landlord-san. That's not like you.”

Koutarou used the time when they were returning to room 106 to scold Shizuka.

Before he could stop her, Shizuka had rushed into the burning house. Because Shizuka was normally so level-headed, Koutarou was even more surprised. And because of that, he gave her a stern look. Normally, Shizuka would be the one to scold others for being so reckless.

“While everything worked out thanks to Alunaya-dono, who knows what would have happened if he hadn't been around...”

“I'm sorry, Satomi-kun. I was reminded of mom and dad because it was right after my grave visit. I got too excited.”

Shizuka was aware of her own failings. Even when taking the situation into account, it wasn't something that should be praised. That's why she had been modest and reflected on her actions as Koutarou scolded her.

“I know it was stupid. I'm really sorry for making you worry. I'll be careful to make sure something like this doesn't happen again.”

“Haah... I'll forgive you this one time.”

Koutarou decided to quickly forgive Shizuka.

Shizuka was aware of her own mistake and was honestly sorry. Besides, Koutarou understood how she felt. He believed that if, after he visited his mother's grave, he came across an accident similar to the one he lost his mother in, he would also have charged in without thinking of the consequences. That's why he couldn't blame Shizuka any further.

“There won't be anyone to stop you in the future, so please be careful.”

“...Yeah.”

Shizuka timidly looked up to confirm if Koutarou was angry or not. She then nodded her head and loosened up her tense expression.

“But anyways, I'm glad everyone was okay.”

Koutarou smiled at Shizuka. While she had been reckless, in the end, everything had turned out okay. The girl that had been left behind had been saved and Shizuka was in one piece. Since the girl might not have made it if they had waited for the fire department, that itself should be celebrated, even if Shizuka's actions shouldn't.

“Yeah...”

But Shizuka still had a gloomy look on her face. She was looking down and let out a small sigh.

“Are you still bothered about it?”

Koutarou assumed that was because Shizuka was regretting being so reckless. That she was still reflecting on her actions. But Shizuka was thinking about something different.

“No, I do regret it, but it's not that... In the end, I couldn't save anyone, just like when mom and dad died. So I'm a bit sad and mortified that I haven't grown...”

Shizuka was feeling down because she believed she hadn't grown at all all these years. In the past she was saved by her parents, and this time she was saved by Alunaya. In the fire, Shizuka herself couldn't do anything. That came as a shock to her.

And in order to walk alongside those she loved, she would need a large power. Her own strength wasn't enough for that. Feeling like she had reached her limits, Shizuka didn't seem like she would recover for a while.

“I thought I would be able to do better like you...”

As Shizuka said that she let out a heavy sigh.

“I'd like to learn the secret behind being a legendary hero.”

Shizuka felt like there was a vast gap between herself and Koutarou. Complex feelings were swirling inside of her and she was having a hard time getting them under control.

“Landlord-san, there's nothing I can teach you.”

“Do you mean I don't have any talent?”

Shizuka smiled bitterly. It was a very self-depreciating smile.

“That's not what I meant...”

This time, Koutarou was the one who smiled wryly.

“Up until now, I have never saved anyone with just my own strength.”

With those words, Koutarou admitted to his own incompetence. He couldn't keep himself from smiling wryly. Of course, Shizuka couldn't accept that. She stopped in place and objected in an upset tone.

“That's a lie! Satomi-kun, you are always–”

“Always borrowing everyone else's power to fight.”

Koutarou stopped as well and turned to face Shizuka. But in contrast to Shizuka, he spoke calmly.

“My power only amounts to being able to handle a sword a little. Truth be told, I am far weaker than you are, landlord-san. That's why there's nothing I can teach you.”

His sword, his armor, his spiritual energy, his spiritual weapons and his magic. Everything Koutarou used when fighting was something he had gotten from others. The only power of his own was his skill with the sword that he had trained in the past Forthorthe. But even then, he couldn't reach a martial arts expert like Shizuka. And if that Shizuka called herself powerless, then what more was Koutarou?

“That's right. The next time there's trouble, should I lend everything to you? That way, I'm sure you'll be able to do far more than I ever could.”

“Satomi-kun...”

Shizuka realized that Koutarou had the same look of helplessness that she had.

That’s right... I even knew that’s the kind of person Satomi-kun was...

Shizuka and Koutarou had matured upon experiencing similar events. That's why Koutarou could feel the same helplessness she did. Even if she asked Koutarou for the solution, she wouldn't get an answer. Having noticed that, Shizuka felt embarrassed by her narrow-mindedness. She wasn't the only one who was unhappy. Wasn't that why she believed she could walk by Koutarou's side? Having been so obsessed with strength, Shizuka had overlooked something so important.

“... I'm sorry. Satomi-kun.”

Shizuka's apology was brief but it contained all kinds of emotions.

“Landlord-san... No, it's fine.”

Those feelings were all conveyed to Koutarou. He also understood how she felt. And because of that, he realized that there was one piece of advice he could give her.

“Landlord-san, there's something I can tell you.”

Koutarou smiled. It wasn't a bitter smile, but a warm smile towards someone who worried about the same things he did.

“And what is that?”

“What you need right now is to be able to honestly rely on others.”

“Rely, on others...?”

“Yes. I was just like you. I couldn't forgive myself for not being able to do anything. I thought it was disgrace to borrow help from others...”

Koutarou couldn't protect the girls of room 106 or the the people he had met in the past Forthorthe with just his own power. It had been borrowed strength that had allowed him to protect them. That's why every time they showed him gratitude, he only felt sorry.

“But... I have people I have to protect no matter what. And I need power to be able to protect them. I don't care whose power that is, as I don't have the room to pick my means.”

If Koutarou only grieved at his powerlessness, he wouldn't be able to protect anyone. He had to make full use of his powers, even if they were borrowed from someone else. Koutarou had something he wanted to protect more than his pride.

“What about you, landlord-san? What do you want to protect?”

As Koutarou was saying these words, he began thinking that he was being a little mean. Shizuka sought strength because of her regret from losing her family. That's why to her, power itself wasn't a goal, but a means to an end. Knowing that, there was only one answer from the beginning.

“... I want to protect everyone. I want to be with everyone forever...”

“I see...”

Koutarou nodded. He was satisfied. Like he had thought, Shizuka had something more important than her pride as well.

“That's about all I can teach you.”

“Satomi-kun...”

Tears began spilling out from Shizuka's eyes. Shizuka felt like she now understood why Koutarou was so strong. It wasn't because of his powers. He was strong because he knew that he was weak. And there was one more thing that she understood.

“Hey, Satomi-kun...”

Shizuka wanted to tell Koutarou. She wanted him to understand. That's why she forgot to wipe away her tears and ardently appealed to him.

“You said that you had never saved anyone, right?”

“Yes. I did...”

“But... but you know, that's not true.”

“Eh?”

Koutarou let out a puzzled voice. Shizuka was looking at Koutarou, but she couldn't see his expression because of her overflowing tears.

“You just saved me right now, without borrowing anyone else’s power, just your own.”

“Landlord-san...”

“You are not powerless. Stay confident, you are someone who can save others.”

Shizuka took Koutarou's hand and squeezed it tightly. As she did, her tears fell onto the back of Koutarou's hand.

It’s so warm...

Feeling Shizuka's warm hand and tears, Koutarou sensed that there was truth in her words. That's why he squeezed her hand back, just as strong.

“Then that's true for you too landlord-san. You just saved me too.”

“... Satomi-kun!!”

In that moment, Shizuka let go of Koutarou's hand and moved to hug him. She knew that suddenly hugging Koutarou would probably surprise him, but she was unable to contain her emotions. She had been convinced that the place she belonged was here.

“Landlord-san...?”

“Don't forget. Even if you're strong or weak... I love you.”

But she was confident that Koutarou wouldn't reject her even if she acted like that.

“... Thank you, landlord-san. I love you too...”

That's because Koutarou had said so himself.

That Shizuka should rely on others more.

Part 20

Upon returning to room 106, Koutarou and Shizuka explained to the girls what had happened and introduced Alunaya to them. The girls had been surprised, but at the same time it made sense to them.

"... I see... No wonder Shizuka is so strong... Alunaya-dono's powers must have leaked out..."

"That would be the case. I held back my power in case the Blue Knight summoned me, but even then some of the spiritual energy leaked out and strengthened Shizuka's body."

"Now that you mention it, there was a movie called Enter the Dragon or something."

"Sanae-chan, I think that's a little different..."

Back when the girls had invaded room 106, Shizuka had used her own combat prowess to suppress their riot. Thinking about it calmly, there was no way that a normal highschool girl would have been able to defeat a ghost, an alien and someone from the underground. That's why everyone could accept that Alunaya had always been inside of Shizuka. The mystery that had gone unsolved for such a long time had now been solved.

"Anyways, I give you all my best regards for the future."

Alunaya was currently running magical power through the crest on Koutarou's right hand, and projecting a small hologram of himself.

That Alunaya looked quite happy. He had originally come for pleasure and to meet Koutarou. So not having to hide his identity was a big plus for

him.With this, he would be able to move around freely and was planning on asking Koutarou and Shizuka to go on a trip to see the world.

“By the way uncle Alu, how long will you stay on Earth for?”

Shizuka turned to Alunaya and asked. She could actually speak to Alunaya in her mind, but that meant that those around her couldn't hear it.

“About that, Shizuka–”

Alunaya responded to Shizuka cheerfully. He was originally very sociable and very curious. He also had a niece around the same age as Shizuka, so he directed similar feelings towards her and the other girls.

“–I will stay until everyone are safe enough. I’m worried after all.”

Koutarou was a precious friend of Alunaya's. That's why he couldn't leave while Koutarou and the others were still in danger. He was planning on helping until their situation stabilized.

“And after that?”

“I will stay until I get sick of this planet, or until you no longer need me, Shizuka.”

As Alunaya said that he looked around. To him, Earth was completely foreign, and he was interested in everything he saw.

“... Then you'll stay as long as I don't hate you?”

“Indeed. I can’t see all of this planet’s attractions in just 100 years.”

With their powerful magical power, elder dragons had a far longer lifespan than humans. Because of that, 100 years was not that long of a time to Alunaya. Comparing it to a human’s, it probably felt like a mere few years. Besides, what had come to Earth was a copy of Alunaya's soul. He would

eventually rejoin with his real body, but the time spent on Earth wouldn't pose much of a problem.

“Good.”

With Alunaya confirming what will happen in the future, Shizuka happily smiled. Alunaya's eyes that had been constantly looking around stopped on Shizuka's expression.

“You welcome me? Are you not scared?”

“I was just surprised, but you're Satomi-kun's friend, so I'm not scared. And I was just happy to have someone protecting me... I feel like I've made a new family member.”

“Me too. I feel like I have gotten more nieces.”

“Ahaha! But uncle Alu, don't look at things you shouldn't.”

“Have no fear. I’ve gotten into a fight with my niece about that in the past. So there is no need to worry. I’ll make sure to close my eyes while you change or visit the bathroom.”

As Alunaya said that, he smiled, revealing his fangs. He then continued by speaking directly to Shizuka's mind so only she could hear.

“...I’ll take extra care when you build a family with Blue Knight... That’s right, maybe I’ll sleep for half a year or so...”

“Uncle Alu!!”

Shizuka's face turned beet red and she shouted out. However, Alunaya didn't seem to care as he cheerfully stared at Shizuka. That was indeed the look of an uncle watching over his niece.

“Sorry, sorry. But would you prefer if I watched?”

“Of course not, geez...”

Shizuka's angry expression reminded Alunaya of his niece. As a result, he felt like he would be able to spend a happy time on Earth.

“Now then, with Shizuka angry, I believe it is time to go to sleep for now.”

“Oh, you're leaving already, uncle monster?”

When Alunaya said he was leaving, Sanae spoke with a sad expression. Since she had finally become friends with the monsters, there were so many things she wanted to ask.

“You should just stay a little longer.”

“Fufu, I would like to do the same, but I’ve pushed myself a little too far.”

“I see. What a shame. Will you come play again?”

“Yes.”

“Uncle Alu, are you okay?”

“Shizuka. Regarding this, there is something I need to apologize for.”

“What? Are you sure you're okay?”

“I am fine, but... to be honest, that transformation in the burning building sapped me of all my magical power.”

“What does that mean?”

“Your weight management will become even harder—”

With a long creak and a loud crack, Shizuka pierced through room 106's tatami and floor and was buried into the ground.

“...Ah, are you okay, Shizuka?”

“I-I'm not... okay...”

Like that, Shizuka's diet failed before it even began.

Yurika's 'Stand by Me'

Part 1

Kenji was well aware that he and Koutarou didn't agree when it came to their outlook on men and women. He believed that it was only natural when he considered Koutarou's upbringing.

Having lost his mother and have his family collapse, Koutarou had become very careful when it came to making a lover. He wouldn't want his lover to face the same fate his mother did, and he didn't want to experience a similar falling out like he had with his father. That's why he wanted someone who he can have a serious relationship with and was right for him. It was only natural for him to think that way.

However, Kenji had a different view on it all. Kenji understood Koutarou's feelings. That's why he had shallow relationships with others that he could easily get out off to confirm whether or not he could have a serious relationship with them. Not only did that solve the same problem, but Kenji's method was more realistic than Koutarou's.

That's why deep down, Koutarou's and Kenji's views synched up. Koutarou's personal experience, and Kenji's experience after looking at Koutarou was what allowed that to happen. They only seem mismatched on the surface. That's why, regardless of how often they collided on this subject, the relationship between them wouldn't break down. The two both knew that it was just on the surface.

That said, Kenji was starting to worry. They were now in their second year of highschool, and Kenji figured that Koutarou should at least get some experience on love. Koutarou had gotten chocolates from several girls last valentine, and Kenji believed that it wouldn't be impossible for Koutarou to

form a relationship with one of those girls. That's why he believed that now was the time for Koutarou to show some guts and take a step forward.

“Hey, Kou. You're always saying that I'm insolent or careless, but–”

“I'm right, aren’t I? I'm sure the girl you were going out with the other day is crying by now.”

“I'm not talking about me. Well, even if I reluctantly admit that I'm careless, there's a problem with you too.”

“With me?”

“Yeah. Carelessness isn't the only thing that make people unhappy. People will get unhappy if they're with someone overly serious like you.”

“That's not true. People are at their best when they're serious. That's what a man is all about, right?”

“... Geez. You know... you really are stuck in your ways...”

As expected, their talk wasn't working out. So Kenji decided to tell Koutarou about something he had been staying quiet about.

“Kou, I haven't said anything about this until now, but because of you I've had my heart broken countless times.”

Kenji had been avoiding telling Koutarou that. He had his pride to think of, however, he had pushed his pride to the side to tell Koutarou. That was just how much he worried for Koutarou.

“Don't make it my fault. They were probably just hurt because you're so careless.”

“That's not it. There have been a lot of girls that have said that they can't go out with me because they like you.”

“They were probably just using that as an excuse.”

“As if there would be that many girls using you as an excuse! What kind of coincidence is that?! Among them, there was sure to be some girls that really liked you!”

Having gotten overly excited, Kenji slammed his fist into his desk. As he did, those surprised by the sound all stared at Kenji, but they soon looked away. This wasn't the first time Koutarou and Kenji had been so noisy after all.

“That might be true, but that has nothing to do with me.”

“It does. Just think about it. You have never gone out with anyone. That means that all the girls that like you, backed away and gave up.”

Having said that much, the tone of Kenji's voice went down a notch. He then whispered so only Koutarou could hear.

“... They all noticed what was hiding behind your smile. That's why they gave up. You get it right? Just by doing nothing, you made those girls unhappy...”

“... Mackenzie...”

While Kenji's voice had been quiet, Koutarou could tell that he was serious. That was because when he said it, he had an earnest look in his eyes.

“Those girls wouldn't have had such an unhappy love life if you had a girlfriend to begin with. So what about it? Is there really no girl you're interested in?”

If there was someone Koutarou was interested in, not showing it would make everyone unhappy. That's how Kenji thought of it.

“... Hmm...”

Normally he would just ignore this kind of topic, but Koutarou understood that Kenji was worried for him and decided to think about it a little.

“For example... what about my Kotori? You know her too. She's a little obsessed with me, her brother, but she's cute in a way.”

“Kin-chan, huh...”

Matsudaira Kotori, her nickname was Mackinley. She was Kenji's precious little sister. Kotori was a spoiled girl and would always follow Koutarou and Kenji around. When left alone, she would cry out of loneliness. The image of Kotori desperately chasing after them had left a strong impression in Koutarou's memories.

Because of that personality of hers, Kenji had high requirements for anyone that would want to become her boyfriend. And Koutarou was one of the few that fulfilled those requirements. At the same time, he believed that he could entrust Kotori to Koutarou. To Kenji, having Kotori and Koutarou become lovers would solve two of his worries at once.

“I think she's a good girl, but I haven't seen her for a while now, so it doesn't quite feel right.”

“You last met her at new year, right?”

“I think so.”

To Kenji, it felt like just half a year, but to Koutarou, it was a little different. The time he had spent in the past world was added onto that half year. So strictly speaking, he hadn't met her for over a year. Koutarou did think that she was a good girl, but his last memory of her was over a year old, so he

couldn't really say. On top of that, Kotori's own feelings needed to be taken into consideration.

“In that case, it can't be helped. Then we'll put Kotori to the side. How about them?”

“Them?”

“Are you getting senile? I mean the girls over there.”

“Ahh...”

Koutarou looked in the direction Kenji was pointing. There, the girls of room 106 were gathered. It was currently lunch break and they were chatting after having eaten their lunch. The only exception was Yurika, who was sitting the closest of the girls to Koutarou. She had eaten her fill, gotten sleepy and was now in the middle of taking a nap.

“You've been getting along well with them lately. Is it because of the play?”

“Ah, yeah. Well, something like that.”

As Koutarou casually looked at the girls, Sanae noticed his glance and turned around. She then cheerfully waved her hand towards him. This caused the other girls to realize that Koutarou was looking their way, and they smiled. After that, the girls returned to their conversation.

“Considering they're like that, I think you have a chance with all of them.”

“I wonder. They're just all really nice.”

“You just can't look at it objectively. Try grading them. I'm sure the girl with the highest points will feel right as you call it.”

“How am I supposed to grade them?”

“Grade their personality or looks. And then add or remove points based on eventful memories. Aim for something like 50 points for being friends, 75 being someone you'd like as a girlfriend and 100 as someone you'd like to marry.”

“Ah... Well, I kind of understand.”

“Then give it a shot. How about starting with Nijino-san who is so casually sleeping?”

“Yurika, huh? Alright, wait a second.”

Kenji pointed to Yurika who was the closest to them. As Koutarou looked at her, he began grading her in his head.

Yurika doesn’t look bad. No, if anything, she’d be cute, I guess? But her personality’s a problem, she’s lazy and whiny...

From Koutarou's point of view, Yurika's personality detracted a lot from her looks. Because of that, if he were to grade her on just those two parts, she would fall below the friend line.

And then you add or remove based on eventful memories...

With Yurika's looks and personality serving as the basis, it wasn't that hard add or remove points. Koutarou traversed his memories, from everything that had happened since the day he met Yurika to today and added points to those events as he went along.

It was terrible at first... but looking back at it now, I made a lot of misunderstandings too... and lately... there have been a lot of plusses...

Yurika was timid and weak to pressure, so his first impression of her had been very bad. However, as time passed, Yurika matured. Koutarou's misunderstandings were corrected and lately, she was now leaning heavily

into the plus side. Yurika rarely showed anything negative as of late. She was still lazy and whiny, but he knew that he could trust her when he had too.

"... Alright."

"What's the score?"

"Wait a minute, I'm totaling it up now."

After finishing grading each event, Koutarou added those points together.

H-Huh...? W-Wait a minute, is this...?

There, Koutarou started getting shaken up.

While she had gotten a big demerit at the start, Yurika's points had increased ever since. By the time they performed their first play, she passed the 50 point friend line. By the second play, she began rapidly scoring more points and easily passed the 75 point line. And she continued scoring even more points after that.

H-Hey, wait... what's up with this...?

Koutarou was astonished as he added the last two points. They were points from when Yurika scored high marks on a test and they had gone out to eat takoyaki together as a reward. However, this score wasn't something that Koutarou could agree on. That's why he redid his calculation over and over again to make sure it wasn't a mistake. But even then, the result stayed the same.

"... To think something like that was..."

"How was it?"

"I-I didn't get the kind of score I was expecting..."

Koutarou tried answering as calmly as he could. But he could feel his emotions rampaging inside of him.

Yurika's final score was 322 points. It came out the same no matter how many times he calculated it.

Indeed, it wasn't the kind of score that Koutarou had expected. He had never imagined that she would get a score that would warrant marrying her three times over. What's more, that score was increasing by every passing day.

“I see. That's too bad.”

“Y-Yeah...”

“Then what about the other girls?”

“The others...?”

However, the reality was that Koutarou would get even more shaken up.

There were still eight more girls in room 106 apart from Yurika.

And Koutarou didn't believe that their score would be that much different from Yurika's.

Part 2

As Koutarou was worried about his new problem. Yurika was worried about her ever-repeating nightmare. In her nightmare, she was walking around in a dark place, ended up in accident and suffered as death came for her. And it wasn't just once, but a total of three times. First, she ran out of

food and starved to death. Next, she ran out of strength as she was being chased by some kind of beast. And finally, she was blown up by a bomb.

“Why is it always meeeeee!!”

As red flames extended in front of Yurika, she woke up.

“Eh, huh...?”

“What's wrong, Yurika?”

“M-Maki-chan?!”

Maki who was nearby stared at Yurika with her eyes wide open. She had been surprised by Yurika's sudden shout. The same was true for everyone nearby.

“A-Actually, I had a scary dream.”

Since it wasn't really anything to hide, Yurika honestly answered.

“To think you'd be able to dream in a noisy place like this... you're quite the bigwig, Nijino Yurika.”

Kiriha smiled happily. It was a very Yurika-esque reason.

“That's not what you call a bigwig, she's just an idiot.”

“Sanae-sama, isn't that going a little too far...”

Sanae was dumbfounded. Ruth tried to follow up on Sanae, but she had a wry smile on her face. After all, Ruth was dumbfounded as well.

“So Yurika-chan, what kind of scary dream was it?”

Shizuka enjoyed disturbances as long as they were small enough, and she looked at Yurika with her eyes full of curiosity. She couldn't help but wonder what kind of dream she had.

“Well, I'm walking around a dark place, and terrible things happen to me and I die. And three times at that...”

“Terrible things... like food poisoning?”

Sanae's guess was food poisoning. Considering how Yurika spent her life, that was the only thing she could image.

“No! I starved to death, was eaten alive and blown up!”

“They're kind of the same thing.”

“They're completely different!!”

Yurika's face turned red as she objected. In the past, she would have just gotten angry that she was being made out to look like an idiot, but she was different now. She didn't want the boy she loved to misunderstand, which gave birth to a powerful sense of embarrassment. That's why Yurika desperately wanted to correct their misunderstanding.

“Oh yeah, there was a game like that...”

The only one that showed a different reaction from the rest of the group was Theia. She seemed convinced of something and nodded repeatedly.

“A game? What are you talking about?”

That word seemed to catch Yurika's attention. That's why she temporarily forgot about her embarrassment and asked Theia for an explanation.

“There was a cavern exploration game that Koutarou and I used to play, remember?”

“Ah!”

As Theia pointed that out, Yurika remembered something.

It was quite a while back, but there was a time when Theia and Koutarou were playing a game where they explored a vast labyrinth while arguing.

“In that game, something similar happened to what you described.”

“Really?”

“Yes. 「Yurika」 ran out of healing items and was left to die. I think 「Yurika A」 was killed by a monster. And 「Yurika B」—”

“I remember now!”

Sanae clapped her hands together with a smile.

“Theia was haphazardly controlling 「Yurika B」 and she walked into a trap and blew up!”

“Ha?!”

At that moment Yurika clearly remembered that time.

The game in question was extremely difficult, and required the player to create many characters and challenge it several times. But halfway through, Theia gave up on thinking of names as it was becoming a hassle, and named the characters after the people in room 106. The name Theia used for magicians was 「Yurika」. But Theia's play style was very rough on magicians and they would often die. After that, she created two more new characters, naming them 「Yurika A」 and 「Yurika B」. A total of three Yurikas were created.

Yurika remembered that all three Yurikas had all died violently. But since it was too much of a pain for Theia, she never recovered their bodies to revive them. She did give it a try once, but it didn't work out. After that, she reached the ending, and nobody had touched the game ever since.

That's why the three Yurikas' corpses were still left unclaimed in the cold labyrinth despite the world having regained its peace.

Part 3

After dinner, Yurika sat herself down in front of the TV and grasped the console's controller with a strained look. Next to her was Sanae. The two of them were going to challenge the game in question.

"How does it look?"

"Ah, the save data is still there!!"

Yurika pointed at the TV screen with a big smile.

Since the game was very old, there was no guarantee that the save data from when Theia was playing it would remain. But fortunately, the game's battery was still alive, and the save data remained.

"That's good. But Yurika, why are you doing this? Couldn't you just erase the data and make it like it never happened?"

"Because, isn't it really scary knowing that three of your corpses are lying in an underground labyrinth?"

"... Why?"

Sanae simply tilted her head to the side in a confused fashion and blinked repeatedly. Having been a ghost until recently, she didn't really understand.

"I feel like it's a bad sign. That's why I don't want to erase the data until I've revived them or properly buried them."

"Hmm, I kinda understand what you're trying to say. Good luck, Yurika."

"Yes."

Yurika was going to recover her own corpses lying in the underground labyrinth. Even though it was a game, she didn't feel alright knowing that three of her own corpses were left behind. And since Yurika was cowardly, knowing that this game was resting right below her, in other words, the lower half of the wardrobe, she couldn't sleep well. She began thinking of the inside of the dark wardrobe as a part of the labyrinth. That said, if she erased the save data and that didn't solve her problems, she would never be able to recover. That's why she wanted to find her corpses and either revive them or bury them.

“Now that I think about it, this game was quite hard...”

Theia who was staring at Yurika's back as she started the game up mumbled. Since she had played it before, she still had some attachment to it.

“You beat the last boss, right?”

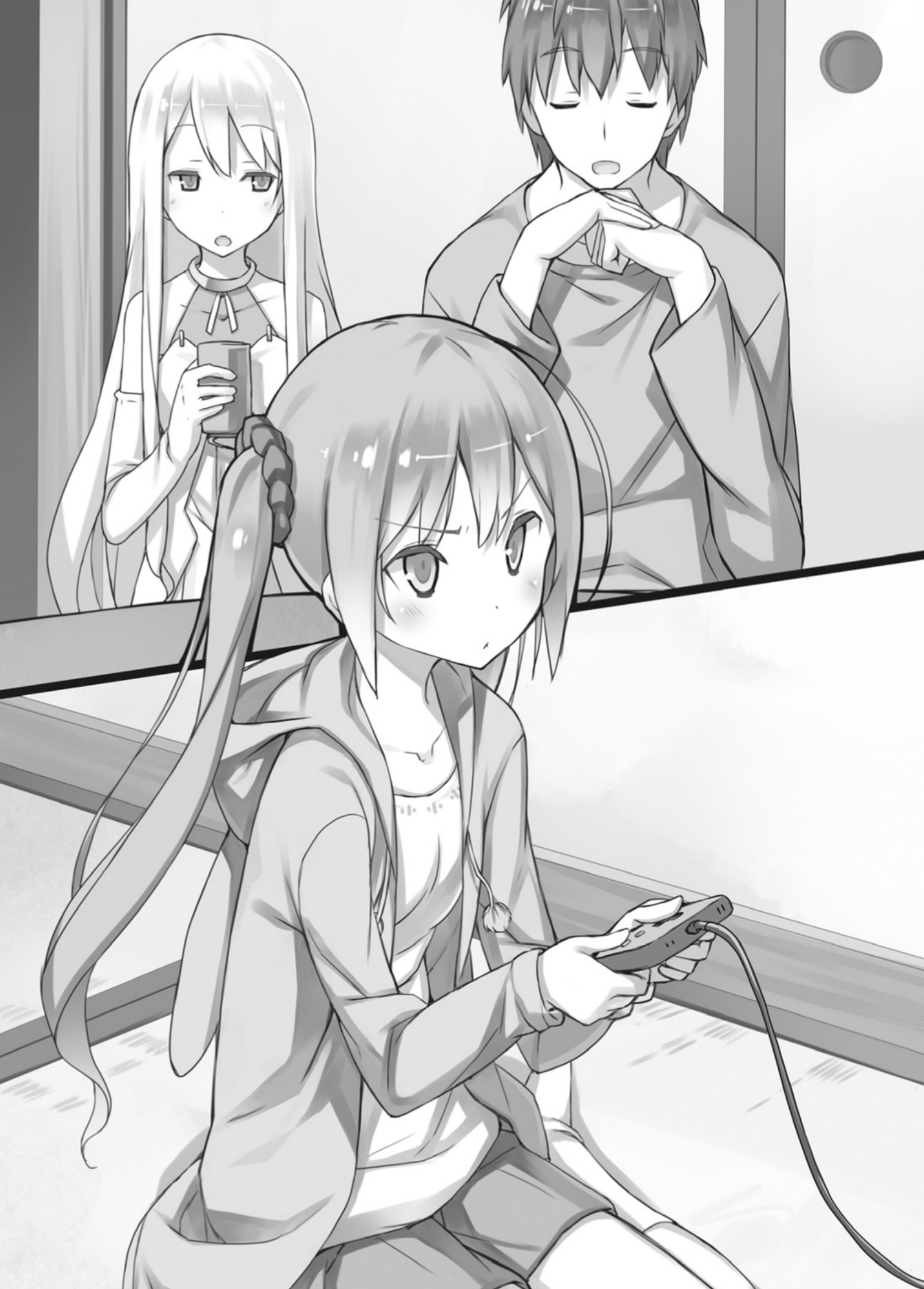
Koutarou joined in and stared at Yurika's back.

“Yes. Even though the enemy was closing in, he was casually drinking tea with his subordinates.”

When Theia was playing the game, Koutarou had helped her out. Because of that, the two of them had traversed most of the underground labyrinth together. They were just like what Yurika and Sanae now were.

“But in the end, I didn't get to fight the rare monster.”

“That's all based on luck. There's nothing you could do.”



Theia had one regret after beating the game; that she had never been able to defeat a secret monster that very rarely appeared in the labyrinth. The chances of encountering that monster were very low and defeating it took a long time. At the same time, she was quite busy, so she had unintentionally moved on from the game.

“Well, you're busy so there's not much time for games.”

Lately Theia had been especially busy. She was currently chased out of her country and had to worry for the citizens that had come with her. She didn't have the time to casually play games. Partially because he has become her vassal, Koutarou understood that as well.

“That's true.”

However, Theia showed a bright smile.

“But truth be told, I played games in part because I wanted to get along with you better. And that's not needed any more, right?”

“Everyone's gotten friendly with each other after all.”

Koutarou remembered seeing Theia's lonely back as she was playing games. Unable to leave her alone, he would often sit down next to her. But now she was different. She was sitting by the tea table, smiling and surrounded by many others.

“Theiamillis-san, I understand how you feel.”

Harumi who was sitting by the same tea table joined in on the conversation.

“In my case it was the plays.”

Harumi put a hand on her chest and smiled happily.

At first, Harumi had worked so hard on the play for Koutarou. He had asked her to do it, and her wanting to draw his attention to herself served as the spark to get her started. But as she was getting into the play, a friendship blossomed with those people around her. She began thinking that she wanted to live up to their expectations.

Harumi was now sitting by this tea table because she had been led by those blossomed feelings. Overall, you could say she was just like Theia.

“I see. I'm glad it was of use to you.”

“Yes. Thank you very much.”

Theia and Harumi smiled at each other as they drank their tea. The two had changed a great deal since they first met.

“... In that case, I seem to be in quite an awkward position, since I was an enemy just a while ago.”

This time, Clan who was lying down on the wall and reading a book joined in. When she thought back to how she used to be, she felt very embarrassed. She couldn't help but turn red and smile bitterly.

“What are you saying, Clan-sama? Most of everyone here were once enemies. It's not like you were the only one.”

Ruth comforted Clan whose shoulders were slumping. Apart from Shizuka and Harumi, everyone else had been enemies with a conflict of interest. While Clan had become everyone's enemy because of the timing, Ruth didn't think she had to worry about it.

“It's just as Ruth says. And judging from the results, I was your ally from the very start.”

Ruth wasn't the only one on Clan's side, Kiriha was the same.

To Kiriha, the girl with the glasses was a precious friend she had met when she was just a child. While it had taken a while for both of them to realize that, overall, Kiriha had been on Clan's side since the start.

That's why though her words were calm as always, the light in Kiriha's eyes reflected her young self.

“Thank you, Pardomshiha... and Kii...”

Thanks to that, Clan was able to smile again. She then opened up her book once more and started reading. In order to hide the tears forming alongside her smile, that book was a must.

“Then strictly speaking, I was everyone's common enemy, wasn't I?”

“That might be true, Shizuka. In order to defeat you, I remember everyone working together to hide their wrongdoings.”

“Is that true, Theia-chan?!”

“Yes. Though it turned to nothing in the following commotion...”

“Oh my...”

The one that made the girls unite was, for good or for bad, Shizuka. Since they needed to unite in order to defeat Shizuka, that unison later allowed them to become friendly with one another. And in the end, even Shizuka ended up joining them. The relationships that had gotten their form in that small room now stretched beyond the very galaxy.

“...”

In that harmonious atmosphere, only one person refrained from joining the conversation: Aika Maki. She used to be an evil magical girl, and she had the shallowest relationship with the people of this room. She had known

Yurika for far longer than the others, but she had always been after her life, so while she knew her, it didn't amount to much.

When compared to everyone else, Maki's relationships came out thinner. That was only natural since not much time has passed. Yet, she was worried about that. Time would eventually solve that problem, but she would see her shallow relationships at unexpected times, and she would begin worrying if she really belonged here.

If she had just been a captive, she might not have worried like this. The fact that she could decide on where she belonged on her own was what made her suffer. Having changed her way of life so recently, Maki still didn't know who she was. And even if she found new things she found precious, she didn't know how to treasure them. That's why she wanted to abandon her freedom and have Koutarou put a curse on her.

Koutarou's captive, his tool or his belonging.

A clear definition would provide her with a place and how to act.

It really is like landlord-san said... I have to do something...

Koutarou noticed Maki's hesitation. That said, it wasn't like he noticed it on his own. It was because Shizuka had told him the other day. As he looked at Maki, he began thinking of what he should do.

It might be best if I do something at least for the short term... Alright.

He still hadn't found a solution, but he had come up with a way to alleviate her worry for the meantime, and Koutarou moved to implement it right away.

“Aika-san, do you have a moment?”

“Yes, what is it?”

When Koutarou called out to her, Maki quickly looked up. Before he even really said anything, she already came up to his side. To Koutarou, she looked like a puppy waiting for her master's orders.

This really isn't good...

Koutarou could feel the anxiety coming from Maki and once again decided that he needed to do something.

"Aika-san, how much do you weigh?"

"Ehm, probably 42 or 43 I think."

"So you're below 45?"

"Yes. Is there something wrong?"

"We'll be going insect hunting later right? When we do, I was thinking of suspending you in the air with a rope and having you go further above us."

Koutarou drew a simple figure on the back of a newspaper. It was an image of Maki being lifted into the air using a pulley and rope.

"Like that, you'll be in charge of the top. If you're 43 kilos, using a pulley and rope that can handle 50 kilos shouldn't be a problem."

"I understand, but... Satomi-kun, is this supposed to be me?"

"Yeah."

"Fufufu, I'm not this cute you know?"

Maki had been perplexed at first, but after Koutarou explained the circumstances, she returned to her normal expression. As a result, she didn't seem as gloomy as she had been just a moment ago.

Aika-san...

And that actually caused Koutarou pain. If this was enough to help her get back to her normal state, just how worried and lonely was this girl feeling? Thinking like that, Koutarou had to put in a lot of effort to keep his smile from disappearing.

“You know, you can tell me that I suck at drawing.”

“You suck.”

“Shut it.”

“Geez... you're the one who said I could say it. And besides, Satomi-kun, I can use magic so something like this isn't necessary.”

“You idiot.”

Koutarou smacked Maki's forehead.

“Ouch?!”

Maki let out a cry of pain and held her forehead. But in contrast to her cry and mannerism, her eyes seemed quite happy.

“Using magic during the insect hunting is forbidden.”

“Why? It will be more convenient that way. Ah, I won't charge you.”

“That's not the problem.”

“... Then what is it?”

“Insect hunting only has a meaning when it is done using a child's intelligence and courage.”

“A child's... I understand. Fufufu, a child... ufufufu.”

Maki slightly narrowed her eyes and cheerfully giggled. Seeing her like that, Koutarou was finally able to relax.

This girl really needs to find happiness...

Seeing Maki finally regain her smile, made Koutarou feel that way.

But Aika-san isn't the only one that needs to find happiness...

Alongside Maki's were eight other smiles. Koutarou had only realized their value very recently.

But behind those smiles lied all kinds of circumstances. And every time those circumstances came to the surface, the smiles would vanish. Koutarou hated that, because every single one of those girls had a score over 300 points.

Although that's a problem I should have noticed by now...

Koutarou had a reason to stake his life to protect any of the nine girls. He could probably die for any one of them. That's what it meant by them having a score above 300. That's why Koutarou wanted to let them find happiness, regardless of what shape that happiness was. That's just how much they had done for him. He didn't mind if he found his happiness last.

Landlord-san?

Looking at each of the girls in turn, Koutarou's eyes met with Shizuka's, the last girl. She was looking back at him as well. As she glimpsed at Maki for a brief moment, she gently narrowed her eyes. That gesture was enough for Koutarou to understand what she was thinking.

Yeah. We can't have anyone become unhappy...

Right now, Shizuka just happened to be sympathizing with Maki, but this wasn't something limited to just the two of them. All of the girls would pay attention to each other, and Koutarou firmly believed that people like that should never feel unhappy.

It was at that moment–

“Koutarou, Koutarou, this is terrible!!”

Sanae's face filled Koutarou's view. Seeing her serious expression, Koutarou's face turned pale.

“What's wrong?!”

“Yurika died again!!”

“What?!”

Since Koutarou had been seriously worrying about the girls, he thought that Yurika had actually died for a moment. But that soon turned out to be a misunderstanding.

“Uuuuhhh, I... I...!!”

The Yurika in question was crouching down in front of the TV and bitterly crying. She was continuously hitting the floor.

“I hate gameeess!!”

The reason was obvious. Yurika's adventure had ended in a grand failure.

Part 4

Unlike modern games, many old games were harsh and hard. That's why just a slight misjudgment could cause you to lose, and the game Yurika was playing was one of those kind of games.

Shortly after Yurika had started her exploration of the underground labyrinth, her party had been wiped out. She got lost, walked into a trap and was attacked by the enemy.

“Well... that was kind of expected.”

“Satomi-sa~n, if you knew, then help instead of being so mean!!”

“That's because you were so enthusiastic about doing it yourself.”

“Please don't only put your trust in me at weird times like that!!”

Yurika was carefree, careless and let her guard down often. Because of her peaceful personality, she wasn't suited for games like this. Lately Yurika's sloppy life had started to become more proper, so Koutarou believed that she might even be able to handle a game like this. But just like with studying, it wasn't something she could do right away.

“Okay, okay. Theia?”

“Yes.”

Being called up by Koutarou, Theia dragged herself closer. Since she was the one who played it before, she should be perfect to recover the corpses. She was also the one responsible for them in the first place.

“Theia and I will help, so give it another try.”

“You can leave it to us.”

“Really?! I knew you were good people since we first met!!”

Yurika took Koutarou's and Theia's hands and shook them.

Ah...

But as she realized that she was holding Koutarou's hand, she instinctively stopped.

“You're so selfish... what's wrong?”

“I-It's nothing! Let's start right away!”

Since she didn't want Koutarou to ask her any more about that, Yurika quickly let go of his hand and picked up the controller.

Yurika would follow Koutarou and Theia's advices, while Sanae would cheer her on. But the situation was wretched.

“You died quite a bit.”

“Yes. You've almost reached the character limit.”

“Koutarou, what happens if you reach the limit?”

“If you reach the limit, you'll have to delete old characters to make new ones.”

“But the old ones are dead inside the dungeon, right?”

“Yeah. That's why if she dies any more, she'll have to delete the dead characters.”

“I can't do that! I'm doing this so I don't delete them!”

“Settle down. You still have one last chance.”

Having adventured haphazardly, Yurika had gotten several adventurers killed. She only had one final chance left. She was now standing on a razor's edge.

“To begin with, let's create the last party. Lend me the controller.”

“Please don't call it the last!”

“It's okay, just calm down.”

“I can't calm down!”

Taking the controller from Yurika, Theia began the creation of new characters. There was a trick to making characters, and since explaining that would take too much time, Theia did it instead.

“Ah, my name?!”

“Fufufu, I'm forming the Satomi band of knights.”

In total, Theia created five characters. Two fighters called Koutarou and Theia, a thief called Ruth, a priest called Sanae and a magician called Yurika C. Apart from Yurika C, they were the elite characters that she had created several times before.

“Why am I the only one done half-assed?!”

“I didn't feel the motivation coming. Why is that I wonder?”

“Don't ask me!!”

After creating the characters, buying weapon and armor, Theia headed for the underground labyrinth. Entering the labyrinth, it was time to level up their characters for a while, so Theia handed the controller back to Yurika and returned to the tea table.

“Yurika, don't go too far in right away.”

“I know. I've been punished for it several times already.”

“Yurika, I'll look at the map, so just walk the way I tell you, as I am the leader.”

“Thank you very much.”

Until the characters grew stronger, there wasn't that much to do, so Theia left that to Yurika.

“Good work, your highness.”

“Thank you, Ruth.”

Ruth put a cup of tea in front of Theia. She then handed out tea to everyone in the room in order, with Koutarou as the last.

“... Here, Master.”

“Thank you.”

She then pressed the now empty plate against her chest and began looking at the game being played on the TV. It was rare for Ruth to be interested in games.

“Ruth-san, are you interested in that game?”

“Well... I was a bit curious about what her highness said before.”

“What I did?”

“Yes.”

Ruth sat down on the opposite end of the table from Koutarou and nodded to Theia. She then began talking with a serious expression.

“There is actually something I wish to request of you, Master.”

“A request? Sure, I don't mind.”

Koutarou had no reason to decline any of Ruth's requests. She was always helping him out after all.

“So what is it?”

“Uhm...”

For some reason, Ruth hesitated. Since she was always one to give clear answers, this was quite a rare sight. At the same time, her cheeks were dyed red. After hesitating like that for a while, Ruth cast an upwards glance at Koutarou as she spoke her request.

“... Ehm, I was wondering if, Master, you could form a band of knights...”

Ruth typically didn't ask something of others. That's why she thought that itself was shameless, and what's more is that she was asking for something as strange as a band of knights. This was something she was only able to ask because it was Koutarou she was talking to, but she was still embarrassed. Ruth felt like she wanted to dig a hole and bury herself in it.

“Band of knights... you mean that?”

Koutarou pointed at the TV. Just before, Theia had created some characters and called them the Satomi band of knights, so that's what he naturally thought of. However Ruth shook her head.

“Not that, I mean a real band of knights.”

“A real one? What do you mean?”

“Master, you are a knight that has been appointed directly by her highness, which means that you are a holy knight, or a high ranking nobility in Forthorthe.”

“Nobility... when did Satomi-kun become so great?”

Harumi who was sitting nearby listening in opened her eyes wide. To Harumi, Koutarou was Koutarou, being told that he was now a noble didn't feel real to her.

“I don't think I've become so important either, ah, sorry Ruth-san, please continue.”

“Yes.”

Ruth continued explaining after nodding slightly.

“Master, a holy knight is permitted both territory and the right to form a band of knights. In this world, it would be equivalent to the Satomi family's private army. I want you to establish that.”

“A-An army?”

Koutarou was astonished.

“You mean having an army in this room?”

There were already 10 people in this small six tatami mat room. It was impossible to station an army in the room on top of that. The best he could do would be to arrange some miniature soldiers. This seemed far too unreasonable for something Ruth would say.

“Are you serious?!”

“That's not what I meant, I just wanted you to establish the band of knights as an organization! A band of knights doesn't necessarily mean you have a lot of soldiers! There are examples of pacifist families who have very few soldiers!”

With her face still red, Ruth hurriedly shook her head. What she wanted was for Koutarou to create a band of knights that he was affiliated with. She never expected him to gather an army.

“A-And then... if you'd let me join...”

Ruth herself was a holy knight as well, so she also had her own band of knights.

But since Koutarou held the highest rank of knight that was given to him by Alaia, Ruth could join his band of knights.

In other words, Ruth wanted the title of being a member of Koutarou's band of knights, even if that could never be publicly revealed. On top of that, the band of knights formed by the Blue Knight would also hold a lot of historical meaning. Having been born a knight and as a woman of Forthorthe, belonging to the Satomi band of knights would be like a dream come true.

“Oh... that's something interesting you've thought of, Ruth.”

That was when Theia who had been listening to Ruth joined in.

“But it's unfair if you're the only one!”

Theia puffed up her cheeks. As a princess, she couldn't join a band of knights, and she was dissatisfied with that.

“Your highness, you are the one who makes use of the band of knights. If anything, I would love to trade places with you.”

“... That's true. Then I am in favor of it too! ...but I won't trade.”

“Yes, your highness. I will forever serve you alongside Master.”

“Good. So there you have it Koutarou, hurry up and announce your establishment of a band of knights. I will approve it right away.”

“Wait a second! What are you going on about with me?!”

“Are you not satisfied with something?”

“This comes even before dissatisfaction! I don't know what's going on!”

“Ruth is saying that she wants to join your band of knights. As a knight, you must know what that means, right?”

“Well, I understand but...”

For a knight, choosing a band of knights was a life-changing decision. It was on the same level as something like marriage. Koutarou understood that well.

“Or are you scared of taking the responsibility?”

“...”

Truth be told, that was exactly what Koutarou was feeling uneasy about. Having Ruth join his band of knights meant that he would need to take responsibility for her for his entire life. That wasn't a decision so easily taken. It was like taking Ruth as his bride.

“Don't worry. Nothing will change from what’s normal. You made a promise with me, right? That you won't die until you've seen us all live a happy life to our fullest...”

“That might be true...”

Koutarou had made a promise with Theia in the past: that he would see through it that all the girls lived their lives happily. He felt like he would do so even if there wasn't a promise. Then, having Ruth join his band of knights shouldn't change anything. It was just as Theia said.

“Besides... Master, in the past you said that you would fulfill any one wish I had. That's why I want to make this my wish. Please.”

“I did, didn't I?”

He had also made a promise with Ruth during the last battle. He would fulfill any one wish if he came back alive. He couldn't simply break that promise, even if it meant forming a band of knights.

There was also one more reason giving Koutarou a push forward.

It's possible that with this... that problem might get solved as well...

He was thinking about Maki, who was currently happily counting money before their insect hunt. The existence of a band of knights might give Maki a mental ground to stand on.

"How about it, Koutarou?"

"Wait a minute, Theia... Aika-san."

"Hm? What is it, Satomi-kun?"

Maki stopped counting and spun the pen in her hand around as she looked at Koutarou. She was in a good mood, and that cheerful smile contained none of the gloominess she had shown before.

If this smile is because she had a purpose, then...

That was where Koutarou made up his mind.

"Aika-san, you're greedy, right?"

"What are you telling a girl all of a sudden... Well, I might be a little strict when it comes to money."

"I have an offer to make to you."

"What?"

"It seems like I'll be making my own band of knights, so how about you work for me?"

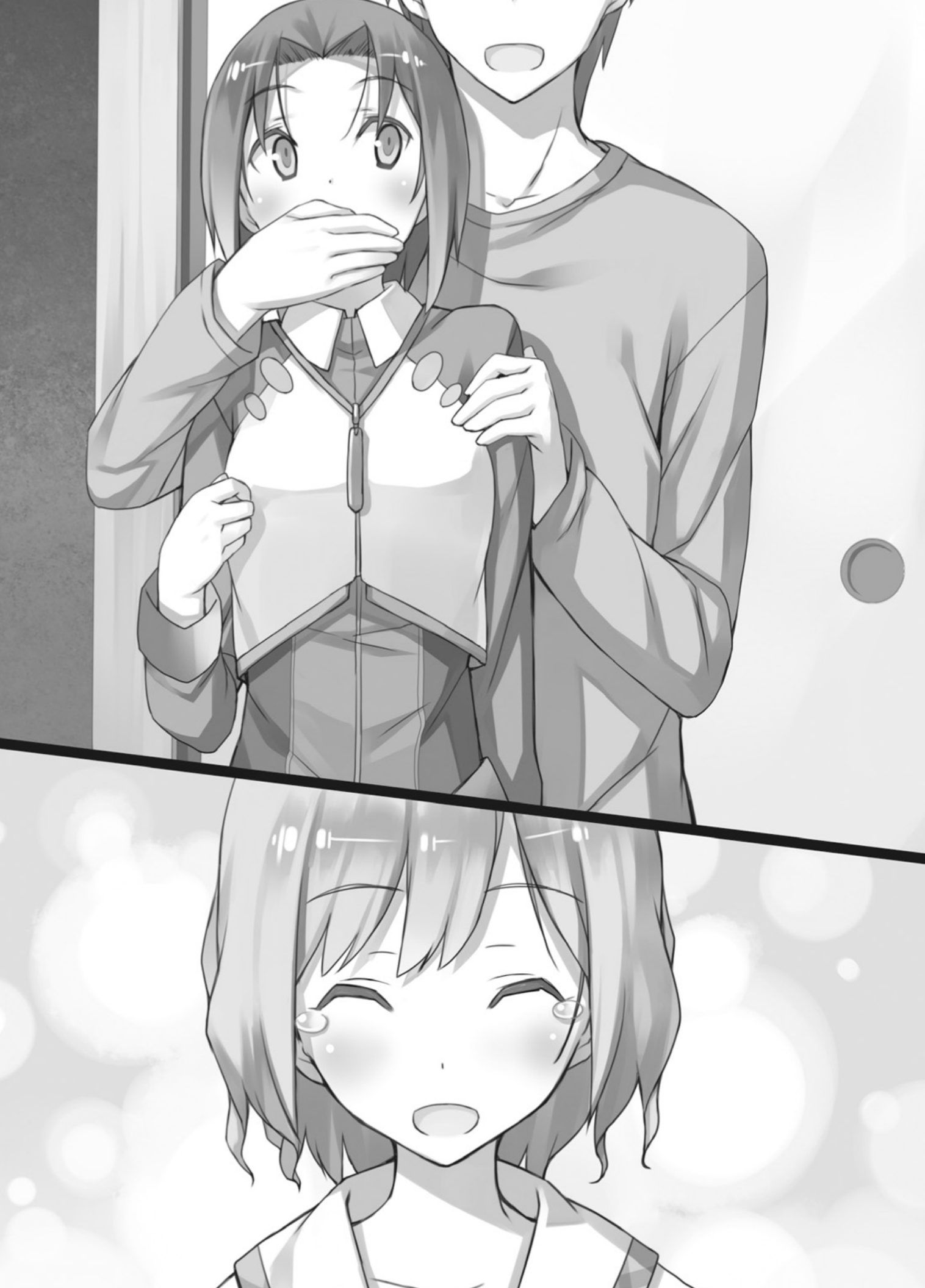
“Work? What do you mean?”

Maki had a perplexed look on her face as she blinked repeatedly.

“Since it's a band of knights, you'd technically be a squire, but you would primarily be the treasurer.”

“Treasurer?”

“Since you would become my employee, I want to make sure the capital can flow properly. But I’m not really good at that kind of thing.”



“Master, if you need someone to manage finances I— mghm?!”

If you need someone to manage finances I will do it.

That was what Ruth was trying to say. She was also confident she could do it properly. However, Koutarou didn't let her finish her sentence. Koutarou forcibly caught Ruth, pulled her closer and restrained her while blocking her mouth. Surprised by that sudden action, Ruth froze up and also began panicking because she was so close to him.

Master, what are you?!

Koutarou was holding her down firmly, and Ruth's struggling a little wasn't doing a thing. Ruth had no choice but to give up resisting. At the same time, she began imagining things.

“It's a boring job, and you can refuse if you want... so how about it?”

“I’ll do it!”

Maki answered immediately with a smile. At the same time, large tears formed in her eyes and fell.

“I see. Then it's decided.”

“Yes!”

Maki nodded with a very happy expression as tears fell, like a stranded person that had just been saved. The only one who could properly understand what had happened was probably only Shizuka. Ruth still hadn't understood the situation and was confused by both Koutarou's actions and Maki's tears. There, Koutarou let go of Ruth and whispered the circumstances into her ear.

“... I'm sorry for taking your job away. But Aika-san needs a goal to strive for right now...”

“Eh...”

At that moment, tears began pouring out from Ruth's eyes as well.

Master... you...

It wasn't the answer that Ruth had expected, but it exceeded her expectations in a different meaning. Koutarou was going to form a band of knights like Ruth and Theia wanted, and he was going to take responsibility for those who joined. Ruth wanted to join his band of knights, even if it was just a title, and that was all she expected. But Koutarou had surpassed her expectations and made a major decision. That's why despite being released, Ruth wasn't able to move until a little while longer.

Part 5

By the time Yurika had gotten her characters up to a sufficient level, room 106 was currently in the middle of discussing a topic completely unrelated to games.

“How cool, Maki, you're a magical knight now!”

“A treasurer really, I'm just a knight by name.”

“Koutarou! I want to join the band of knights too! I'll be in charge of the chores!”

“Not yet. You can't become Theia's ally yet. Keep trying to take over this room for a while.”

“Boo, why can't I join under the assumption that I'll overthrow my lord?”

“Higashihongan-san, let's wait for everything to calm down a little more before we join the band of knights.”

“You're joining too, Harumi? What position do you want?”

“Uhm... maybe his secretary?”

“Alright, with me, Maki and Harumi, we'll form the magical knight team!”

“You're not gonna let Yurika join?”

“Tsk tsk tsk. Maki, magical girl teams have always consisted of two, three or five people.”

“I see... I'm a magician, but I never knew that...”

“Kiriha-san looks like she would get to join as a normal general.”

“And with your martial arts, you could probably join as a normal knight.”

“Your highness, it seems like there are a lot of applicants.”

“Very good! That makes me proud!”

“Bertorion, of course I will be your science advisor, right?”

Yurika had put down the controller to report on her progress, but she was perplexed by the situation.

Uhm, aren’t I being forgotten? In more ways than one...

Yurika's eyes started to moisten. Being unable to sleep because she was scared of her corpses in the game was one problem, but having Koutarou and the others forget about her was an even bigger problem.

“Oh, Yurika, are you done grinding?”

“How's it look?”

But it seems like Yurika was worrying over nothing. Koutarou and Theia noticed her right away and returned to in front of the TV, which made Yurika feel puzzled once again.

Something really is different from before...

With that vague thought in her mind, Yurika looked up at Koutarou and Theia. As Koutarou sat down next to Yurika and his face drew closer, she recalled when she had hugged him from behind a while back. Back then, she had felt that they needed one another. Yurika's heart suddenly started to beat faster and she got embarrassed.

“I-I've gotten to the level you told me to get to!”

Yurika wiped her tears with both hands. She couldn't show the tears that had formed because of her misunderstanding, and that action hid her blushed cheeks as well.

“Yes, it seems like you've reached level 8. With this, we should be able to proceed.”

“Good job Yurika, this is where the game really gets started.”

“Y-Yes.”

Fortunately, neither of them seemed to notice, and Yurika nodded firmly as she stroked her chest in relief.

In total, there were now three dead Yurika's in the game. Theia recalled the location of one, 「Yurika」.

“It's just past this point.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Back then I ran out of healing items, and the magician, 「Yurika」 was out of magical power, so I prioritized the other characters. That's why she died.”

“Theia-chan!!”

“That's why I sent another character with a bunch of healing items here—”

“And replaced the dead 「Yurika」.”

“That's right.”

“Heeee~yyy!!”

“S-Sorry! But it was thanks to 「Yurika」's sacrifice that we were able to beat the mid boss! So rejoice!”

“I can't rejoice if I'm dead!”

“Okay, okay, I was wrong, so let's push on ahead, okay?”

“Uuuhh, something still feels wrong.”

Theia was guiding Yurika by relying on the map she had drawn herself. Since the labyrinth was made using simple wireframe, every place looked the same. If it wasn't for Theia, any kind of searching would have been difficult.

“It should be around here.”

“Really?!”

The characters Yurika was controlling reached their destination. She then operated the controller and had the party characters search the area.

'Found Yurika's corpse!'

“There she is!”

Yurika pointed at the screen with a bright smile. Yurika was ecstatic over having found 「Yurika」's corpse.

"... Koutarou, this is kind of surreal."

"... Shh, Yurika will hear you."

Though there had been some difference in reaction, Yurika had safely completed her first goal, and her morale was on the rise.

"Alright. Just two more to go! Where to next?"

"Before that, confirm what 「Yurika」 is holding. She might have something we can use."

"I understand... huh? She doesn't have anything at all?"

"... It seems like the monsters devoured most of her because she was down here for so long..."

"Eeeehhhhhhhhh?!"

Yurika imagined how 「Yurika」 must have looked, and her face turned pale. As a result, all the joy from having found the corpse was gone.

"Stop crying, we're moving on to the next! I'm curious about 「Yurika A」 and 「Yurika B」!"

"Uuhhh, I'm sure they've been devoured too..."

Yurika continued playing while crying.

However, her suffering had only just begun.

Part 6

Theia had remembered where 「Yurika」 had been because she had died before a major battle, but her memory of 「Yurika A」 was vague. Since she

died during Theia's standard exploration, it had been buried alongside other memories.

“Hmm. I think it was around here...?”

Theia tilted her head as she checked her map. Based on the scribble on the map, she was certain that 「Yurika A」 was close, but she didn't know her exact position.

“How did the search spell go?”

“She’s still out of range. We'd have to try it repeatedly around this area.”

“Sounds like it'll take a lot of time. You better prepare yourself, Yurika.”

“Uuuhhhh, I understand...”

Normally, Yurika would have whined at that, but since she was too concerned about 「Yurika A」 and 「Yurika B」, she couldn't back down now. But that was when a helping hand reached out to Yurika.

“Bertorion, may I say something?”

That person was surprisingly enough Clan. She closed the book she was reading and lied down on the wall she was using as a floor, looking down at Koutarou.

“What?”

“While having me analyze the game's data to pull out the correct places might be going too far, couldn't you have Sanae use her spiritual powers?”

“I see. That would still be categorized as Sanae's talents.”

As Yurika was playing the game, she wanted to do this without using any cheat tools. That included not analyzing the data to locate the corpses.

However, Sanae's spiritual powers was a talent of her own, similar to sight and hearing. Koutarou felt like it was on the okay side, though only barely.

“Sanae, can you do it?”

“I've tried it on this game before.”

Sanae pulled out a mystery game that centered around a serial killer from the pile of games lying next to the TV and showed it to Koutarou.

“But I couldn't see the killer, only numbers and old men.”

Sanae and Koutarou had played this game together once, but when Sanae wanted to find out who the killer was, she tried cheating by using her spiritual powers. But in the end she couldn't, and ended up having to play it through to the end together with Koutarou.

“What do you mean? It doesn't work on games?”

“It is probably something like this.”

As Koutarou looked confused, Kiriha began explaining her own theory.

“When humans play games, they absorb information from the TV screen. Which means that any spiritual traces are not in the game itself, but in the screen. That's why she can probably sense the feelings of the creators of the game.”

“So she could just use her powers on the TV then?”

“That won't work. Even if she tried, there are too many other spiritual traces, making it very hard to find information pertaining to that particular game.”

Far more than one game had been played on Koutarou's TV. It had also showed countless other TV shows. Extracting the information about that

particular game, and then on top of that, finding information about where 「Yurika A」 and 「Yurika B」 had died was next to impossible.

“So it's no use, huh... I thought it was a good idea...”

“That still might be the case. There are other things Sanae could use her powers on.”

Koutarou's shoulders had dropped in disappointment, but Kiriha was still confident.

Shortly after she used her spiritual powers, Sanae showed a big smile.

“Ah, this works! It's probably around here!”

She then pointed to a certain point on the map. She seemed confident and her smile was bright.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I mostly see complaints about you, Koutarou, but I can see faint traces of disappointment in Theia as she failed.”

“Well done, you are correct.”

“But, Theia.”

“Hm?”

“If you want to kiss him, just do it.”

“Waaaaaahhh!! You don't have to find out more than you need!!”

Sanae had used her spiritual powers on Theia's homemade map.

If she read the emotions from when the map was being drawn, she could understand what happened back then. As a result, while a lot of Theia's

other emotions were included, Sanae was able to find the place where Theia had failed.

“Yurika, turn at that corner, and when you reach the end turn right.”

“Oka~y.”

Following Koutarou's directions, Yurika headed towards her destination. Before long, 「Yurika A」's corpse was found, and her second goal was accomplished.

Part 7

While she had managed to find 「Yurika A」's corpse, Yurika's face turned pale again. That was because the corpses was found in an odd place.

“... T-The corpse before was better off...”

She had died next to an underground lake. But as time passed, it seemed like the monsters had pulled 「Yurika A」 into the lake, and she was found at the very bottom. What was even worse was that as her body decayed, it spread a strong air of toxicity around the area, further decaying the corpse. Many of the girls imagining the scene before them were relieved that it wasn't them.

“D-Don't feel bad, Yurika, let's go find the last corpse!”

Not even Theia could say anything, and instead suggested that they quickly move on.

“...Uhm, Theia-chan, you...?”

With tears gushing out of her eyes, Yurika slowly approached Theia like a zombie.

“I-I'm sorry, Yurika, I never expected she would be buried under water!! It was my fault!!”

Theia lost out to the strange oppressive atmosphere and earnestly apologized.

“This is a game, Yurika! It's just a game! Calm down!”

“...Well, to Theia-chan, it might just be a game...”

Yurika continued approaching, but her oppressive aura seemed to have run out of steam and before her stretched out hand reached Theia, it stopped. But even then, her tears continued streaming.

“L-Let's move on! Sanae, could you find the last spot!”

Having narrowly escaped death, Theia picked up the controller herself so she could move away from this place as quickly as possible. She then headed in the direction of the last location that she had a vague memory of.

“Hmm~, about that... something is strange...”

That was when Sanae, who was in charge of navigation, tilted her head in confusion.

“S-Strange? What do you mean?”

Since Theia didn't want any more of this kind of trouble, Sanae's words shook her.

“Well, I can't really tell where Yurika died. Theia, is this really the place?”

“What floor does it say on the map?”

“Eighth floor.”

“Are there a bunch of marks for bombs drawn on it?”

“There are. Almost the entire floor is covered with bomb marks.”

“Then there's no doubt, this is the place.”

In Theia's memories, the remaining 「Yurika B」 died on this floor. But it didn't seem like it to Sanae.

“But it's strange. Yurika's position is kind of spread throughout the entire area like mist.”

“Kiriha, what could that mean?”

“Hmm. Could it mean that you weren't focused too much on Yurika, or rather the characters, as you were exploring this floor? That might be why there's no clear image on the map, but it's spread throughout the entirety of it. What were you doing on this floor?”

“Well, I think... Ah?!”

Blood drained from Theia's face again. She had an idea as to why she hadn't been so focused on the characters when she was drawing the map of this floor.

“W-Who knows? I don't really remember. I might have been busy back then.”

However, rather than revealing that reason, she attempted to hide it. She had to hide the evil she had done in the past to keep her position from getting any worse. However, inside room 106 was someone who didn't worry about Theia's position.

“I know. When 「Yurika B」 died, Theia was half-assedly exploring while humming. I think she was using 「Yurika B」 alone, and then she walked into a bomb, and went kaboom.”

“Ah, hey?!”

Even someone as unfamiliar with games like Yurika could figure out why Theia had sent down 「Yurika B」 alone into a minefield.

“D-Did you throw me... did you throw 「Yurika B」 into a minefield to use her as a living mine detector?!”

“N-No! That's not true!”

Theia hurriedly denied the accusation, but Yurika pressed on even more.

“Then why?! Why did you have me walk all alone in a dangerous place like this?!”

“T-That's...”

Theia couldn't answer her. The truth was just as Yurika had guessed.

As Theia was exploring the eighth floor, she ran into the problem of the minefield. In order to solve it, she created a large amount of characters and sent them through. 「Yurika B」 was one of those characters. They were killed, revived and sent back into the minefield several times. As a result, she was able to find all the bombs, completing her map.

It was because of that that Theia's memory of each individual character was so vague. And because they had all died several times, her impressions of where they died were vague. This took place throughout the entirety of the eighth floor, which was why 「Yurika B」's location felt like a mist to Sanae.

“That's...”

“Theia-chan!!”

This day was the first time Yurika beat Theia in a fight.

However, Yurika, the supposed winner, looked like she had suffered a disastrous defeat and was crying bitterly.

Part 8

Theia was stroking her head as she explored the underground labyrinth. Theia actually had a large bump on her head. It was a dishonorable injury, but it was something she had caused herself in the past, so she had no choice but to accept it. Of course, Theia volunteered to continue the exploration herself.

“Really... Theia-chan you don't think of how others feel.”

“The past me was a fool. Forgive me.”

“Geez... just this time, okay?”

“Y-Yes. Sorry.”

Yurika was still angry, but Theia had played this game about a year ago. Comparing them, the past Theia and the present Theia were like two different people. That's why Yurika was barely able to forgive her. She knew that even if she continued to blame the present Theia, nothing good would come from it.

“That aside. How does it look?”

Waiting for an opening, Koutarou gave Theia a helping hand. Theia answered Koutarou, feeling a sense of relief.

“It doesn't look good. There's too many places to search. I have to search, fall back and repeat.”

“I see... that's not good...”

Unable to rely on Sanae's help anymore, they had no choice but to search the entire floor. It would take time to solve this problem.

“Satomi-kun.”

“Yes, senpai?”

“I was thinking about something.”

That was when Harumi joined in on the conversation. Harumi wasn't very good at games, so she had stayed quiet for a while, but sensing that they had reached a dead end, she decided to speak up. Because in this situation, they should be able to listen to what she has to say as well.

“The map of this area is complete, right?”

“Yes... right, Theia?”

“Indeed, it's completed... but what about it?”

Koutarou and Theia listened to her right away. Like Harumi had expected, they were desperate.

“Uhm, if you threw Nijino-san and the others into the minefield until—”

“Uuuhhh~”

“—the map was completed, then she should have been alive until then, right?”

“That's right. I revived and used her several times.”

“Uuuhhh~”

“Then wouldn't she be in the area of the map you finished last? You stopped reviving her because the map was complete, right?”

“Uuuhhh~”

“I get it! Theia!”

“Yes, I'm headed there right now.”

Theia had been centering her search around the path leading from the seventh floor to the ninth floor. But she had actually found the entrance to the ninth floor when the map was only halfway complete. She had completed the last part of the map visiting previously unexplored areas.

Theia listened to Harumi's idea and headed towards that place. Theia felt like Harumi was correct as well.

“How clever! As expected from Harumi, the perfect woman!”

“I'm not that great...”

Harumi started blushing as Sanae praised her. She was embarrassed from the exaggerated praise, but she was happy that she could be of use to Koutarou and the others.

“Koutarou, the search spell reacted to something! Looks like Harumi was spot on! 「Yurika B」 is just up ahead!”

“Alright!”

“... Finally, the last one... though she's been blown up...”

Koutarou rejoiced at Theia's report while Yurika started tearing up.

It was just a game, but she was deeply attached to the characters with her name. Before she recovered the last one, Yurika recalled the hardships she had gone through to get to this point. It was only natural for tears to form.

They were just a few steps away from their destination when the screen suddenly shifted. They had encountered a monster that dwelled on the eighth floor.

“Hurry up and kill it.”

“I know. It's probably just a weakling any— wait, what?”

However, a monster that Theia had never seen before appeared. It looked similar to a zombie, but it was bigger and stronger. And the song playing was different from normal. It was the same song as the one that had played during her battle with the final boss.

“Koutarou! C-Could this be–?!”

“Woah?! There it is! The rare monster!! To think it'd appear now!!”

It was the rare monster that Theia had sought after. The creator had designed this monster after a person that he hated during his time in school, and defeating it gave the player a medal as a commemorative gift. Having this medal or not was one of the biggest deals amongst the kids at the time.

And the appearance of this monster pointed to a single fact.

“Sorry Yurika! It seems like our luck is the worst!”

“W-What are you talking about all of a sudden...?”

“Yurika, calm down and listen carefully. You can't escape from this monster.”

“Then hurry up and beat it, Satomi-san.”

“But this monster is strong. Very much so. In fact, it's stronger than the last boss.”

“... Which means?”

“「Yurika C」 will die here.”

“Nooooooooooooooooooooo!!”

Like that, the adventure reached its end, and another one of Yurika's corpses was added to the underground labyrinth.

A Weekend in Forthorthe

Part 1

Trying to return from Forthorthe 2,000 years ago to present day Earth, Koutarou and Clan had a big problem, and that was that the spaceship, the Cradle, had broken down and couldn't fly through space.

The part of the ship that had broken down was a small part, and as long as Clan could get her hands on a replacement, she could finish repairs within five minutes. But that part wasn't something she could get her hands on in the past Forthorthe. That's why Koutarou and Clan had to wait until it started getting produced.

There were two things they needed in order to be able to wait for 2,000 years. That was the technology to stop time, and a place where they could wait for 2,000 years. The former was something the Cradle was equipped with, and Clan had an idea for the latter.

That place was called 'Bertorion's special territory'. Koutarou and Clan would hide the Cradle in an area that Alaia would later declare as an inviolable domain. They would then freeze time on board the ship and wait 2,000 years.

“It's over.”

“Are you sure? It doesn't feel like anything happened...”

“That's only natural. The time onboard was frozen after all.”

It didn't feel like time had stopped to Koutarou. Clan had been busily working on her operator's panel, and nothing similar to what he had thought would happen occurred.

“I thought it would glow or shake or something.”

“I think that happened, but since we were frozen in time, we couldn't perceive it.”

“So we're 20 years in the past now?”

“That's right. If you step out, you'll see.”

Using the Cradle's ability to distort space, Clan had altered the speed at which time progressed inside the ship and outside. With that, a single moment onboard was 2,000 years outside. Glowing and shaken had occurred at the very start, but it only lasted for a few seconds on the outside, and it wasn't long enough that Koutarou could perceive it inside.

“However, it isn't exactly 20 years.”

Clan continued to busily operate her panel while explaining to Koutarou. She had to confirm the Cradle's current condition and the likes, so there was a lot to do.

“What do you mean?”

“People celebrating the 2,000th anniversary of Alaia-san's ascension to the throne might come if we arrive at precisely the same day we came, right? I set it so that we'd arrive a little before the ceremony.”

“I see.”

While 'Bertorion's special territory' was an inviolable domain that Alaia had created and entry was forbidden, it didn't mean that people wouldn't enter. People from the Pardomshiha family, who were in charge of managing the territory, would patrol the area, and people from history programs would get permission to shoot inside, as long as they didn't disturb the environment.

And since 20 years ago was the 2,000th anniversary of Alaia's ascension to the throne, the amount of people would inevitably increase. That's why Clan adjusted the time so that they wouldn't come into contact with someone.

“Then I'll take a look outside. You keep doing that.”

“I'm counting on you.”

Koutarou left Clan behind and left the cockpit. Since Clan had some work to do after their time travel, Koutarou went outside to confirm that it was safe.

“But don't go too far.”

As Koutarou left the cockpit and entered the living quarters, Clan's hologram appeared. Her hologram moved along with him.

“I know. You get lonely easily after all.”

“That's not what I meant!!”

“Don't worry. There is no way I would leave my beloved princess Clariossa behind and vanish.”

“... You... I will kill you someday...”

Clan's hologram was there to assist Koutarou. As long as he didn't go too far away from the Cradle, he could talk to Clan and she could back him up with equipment from the ship.

However, Koutarou misunderstood Clan on purpose to tease her. That irritated Clan, even more than normal since she actually was feeling a little lonely. As a result, Clan's tone and eyes were more aggressive than normal.

“When we get back to the present time, prepare yourself for pain!”

“This is a good chance, how about you teach me a sport played in Forthorthe?”

“Geez, I hate that side of you!”

While listening to Clan's angry voice, Koutarou walked through the living quarters and headed towards the airlock leading outside. Doors and hatches opened automatically for him, one after another. This was thanks to Clan.

“Isn't it a little bit too late for us to fight?”

“Then stop with that provoking attitude!”

Alongside Clan's grudgeful voice, the last hatch opened before Koutarou. As it did, warm air blew in from the outside.

Ah, 2,000 years have passed, hasn’t it...

Koutarou and Clan had parted with Alaia and the others in winter. The air back then had been cold. This change in temperature allowed Koutarou to actually feel like time had passed.

“Yeah, my bad.”

“Seriously now... That aside, I don't want to get into the same kind of trouble as 2,000 years ago. Let's be careful in this age.”

“That was the plan, but... there's something I want to apologize for.”

“What?”

“It's already too late.”

Past the airlock, outside the Cradle was a single girl who had fallen on her butt. With an astonished look on her face she blankly stared up at Koutarou.

Theia...?

Koutarou was just as surprised. He had been surprised by her sudden appearance, but what shocked him the most was her looks. She looked very similar to a girl he vividly remembered. However, she was one size taller, her face was more mature and her hair was much longer. Since this was a different age, it was clear that it was a different person, but he still couldn't restrain his surprise as she looked just like the girl in his memories.

She was in this place because she was an archaeologist.

Her archaeology team was working to shed light on the many mysteries of the life of Forthorthe's legendary hero, the Blue Knight.

The research on the Blue Knight was mostly centered around the notes that the famous Silver Princess, Alaia, had left behind. That said, not everything had been written down in Alaia's notes. Different research records was necessary to fill in the blanks left out of the notes.

But no matter how many records were gathered, there were two major unexplained points revolving the Blue Knight:

Where did the Blue Knight come from,

And where did he go?

The Blue Knight's appearance and life had been vivid, and even 2,000 years later, his deeds were deeply engraved in the hearts of the citizens. However, there were no traces of him before or after. There was a surprising lack of information of where he had come from and where he had gone.

Because of that, there were a lot of theories about it in the archaeology field. As for where he came from, there was a theory that he was from a distant country, or a love child of some noble. As for after the events, there were

theories that he had left for a distant place, died from wounds suffered in the war or assassinated. There was a large variety of theories.

But there was a lack of proof for any of them. Not even the most credible theory had proof from multiple records.

If only those parts had been written down in Alaia's notes as well, but sadly they hadn't. The archaeologist girl even began suspecting that Alaia had hidden the facts on purpose.

And the truth was that Alaia did indeed hide it on purpose. The archaeologist girl suspected that the secret might lie in the 'Bertorion's special territory' and sent in an application to investigate it.

Normally, this application would be rejected. 'Bertorion's special territory' was territory that Alaia had given to Bertorion. Because of the authority that Alaia had given to the Blue Knight, not even royalty could do as they pleased.

But this girl had a chance of success.

Forthorthe would soon celebrate the 2,000th anniversary of Alaia's ascension. To commemorate this, there was a large amount of events regarding the Blue Knight and the Silver Princess planned. If a new discovery could be made, it might serve as the crowning feature of the anniversary.

On top of that, the citizens were terribly excited. Blue and white decorations filled the cities. Several movies were exhibited and a lot of the archaeology girl's results were included in them.

If that celebratory mood was taken advantage of properly, it could be possible to earn the citizens' understanding. If they did, the parliament

might take action as well. The political groundwork for that was being made under the surface.

All that would be needed now was an established fact. If she went on ahead and found something related to the Blue Knight and announced it to the public, she would earn the public's support. If that happened, the public opinion would start leaning towards performing a large-scale investigation.

That's why the archaeology girl had secretly entered 'Bertorion's special territory'. However, what she discovered wasn't anything on just the level of 'something related to the Blue Knight'.

Part 2

There was a large cave inside of 'Bertorion's special territory'. This cave was one of the bases that the Silver Princess and the Blue Knight had used when they were fighting the coup d'etat army. There were a lot of traces of this remaining, and it consisted primarily of plates and cups and other items resistant to corrosion.

And furthest into the cave was a stone monument that Alaia had put up after the war. The following words were engraved on that monument:

'May the knights who left for the other side of the sky have a peaceful sleep. Let none disturb their sleep.'

It was a stone monument, praying for the soldiers that had fallen in the war.

That's why, when the archaeologist girl saw what was on the other side of the monument, she thought she was seeing an illusion. The scientific measuring she had taken just before showed that the monument was over 2,000 years old, and the weathered condition of the monument and its engraved text also served to prove that.

“This is impossible...”

That's why the thing that had appeared on the other side of the stone monument had to be older than 2,000 years. It had to be, or it would be irrational.

“What is this...?”

On the other side of the monument was a small spaceship. More precisely, it was the airlock hatch on the side of the ship. That hatch was opening up in front of the girl who had fallen onto her butt.

“... I don't understand... but this must be the answer...”

An endless time and a countless distance.

Those words echoed inside of the girl. She couldn't understand a thing, but she was convinced that she was facing the hidden truth of Forthorthe.

Part 3

The fact that they met by the airlock and that the girl had confirmed that the age of the monument through scientific means meant that the girl figured out that Koutarou was the Blue Knight right away. Appearing from behind something over 2,000 years was proof itself that the person was from 2,000 years as well. It was impossible to make up an excuse for this.

“Time travel... then you really are Reios-sama?!”

“No, that's not it. I got in the way of the Blue Knight's and the Silver Princess's meeting, so I'm just a substitute.”

“But if you were there from beginning to end, then you are Reios-sama in this world, that is a historical fact... Wow, it's the real Blue Knight!!”

The girl was squirming and rejoicing as she continued to point a camera at Koutarou and snapped one picture after another. She looked less like an archaeologist and more like a fan meeting her favorite idol.

“Like I said, I'm not the Blue Knight...”

“Why don't you give up and admit it already, Bertorion.”

“How irresponsible... Besides, it's because you called me Bertorion that she found out.”

“Ugh... t-that's...”

Koutarou and Clan had already resigned themselves. Since the girl was an archaeologist, there was no way they would be able to fool her. On top of that, she had evidence, so there was nothing they could do.

As Koutarou and Clan were dropping their shoulders, the girl who was satisfied with her pictures returned to them.

“Fufu, I'm sure everyone would be surprised when they find out that Reios-sama was actually an alien...”

The girl was laughing as she pressed her camera against her chest. She looked like a child who had just gotten her birthday present.

“About that, could you wait a while before making it public?”

They had given up on keeping the truth from her, but there was one thing they could never back down on. That was that they would be troubled if the truth was revealed.

“Why, Reios-sama?”

The girl had a confused look on her face. It was impossible to lie to this clever-looking girl. They would need to persuade her using the truth.

“That's, uhm... Clan?”

Koutarou wanted to explain it himself, but he abandoned that idea shortly after starting. He felt like Clan would be able explain it far better than him.

“Geez... you only rely on me at times like these.”

Clan seemed a bit annoyed as she adjusted her glasses, but she started explaining the situation.

“We told you that we were trying to protect history in the past, yes?”

“Yes... you travelled to the past, but Reios-sama wasn't there. That's why you served as his replacement so you could return to your own time.”

“The truth is, this is still the past to us.”

“Then you don't want to change history now either?”

“That's right. In the future where we came from, the Blue Knight's identity was still unknown.”

“Then if I announce the truth...”

“History would change, and we would never be able to return to our own world. In fact, who knows what would happen to us.”

If this girl announced the truth from 2,000 years ago to the public, the fact that Satomi Koutarou from Earth was the Blue Knight would be known through out all of Forthorthe. Which meant that there was next to no chance that Theia would come to invade, and Koutarou would no longer be able to become the Blue Knight. Of course, Clan would most likely not come to Earth either, and they would not have travelled to the past using the super-space-time repulsion shell.

Once that happened, nobody knew what would happen to this Koutarou and Clan. They might just simply not be able to return to their own world, or something far worse could happen. But regardless of what would happen, it wasn't something that would be welcomed.

“At the very least, could you keep it quiet until the time comes when the present day Bertorion and I travel to the past? Please?”

“But...”

Archaeology was this girl's reason for living. She was especially enthusiastic when it came to the Blue Knight. But revealing the truth about the Blue Knight would put his very existence in danger. It was a painful problem for the girl.

“You're telling me to run down the previously set rails of time?”

“Sadly... Bertorion and I can only ask you to do so. We'll leave the decision up to you however.”

Since Koutarou and Clan needed to return to their world, 20 years from now, they couldn't keep watch over the girl forever. That's why they didn't know what the girl would do, and all they could do was to plead with her.

Part 4

In order for Koutarou and Clan to explain the situation in more detail, they invited the girl onboard the Cradle. They were currently preparing tea using the tea leaves they obtained 2,000 years ago.

“Could this be the extinct Rubustori tea?!”

“Extinct?”

“Yes! This tea's leaves were taken from the Rubustori tree, but due to a disease from out of the country 800 years ago, it is now extinct. The only ones remaining now are a subspecies that had some resistance to the disease... I am moved to be able to drink this, Reios-sama!”

“... Hey Clan, sounds like our favorite tea has gone extinct.”

“That's no problem. I got some seeds for research.”

“You have seeds?!”

“I do. Would you like to take some with you?”

“Please, I would gladly take some!!”

The Cradle's living quarters contained a mountain of treasures for the archaeologist girl. Marvels of the future and relics of the past existed together and no matter where she looked, she was surprised. There was no time to relax. Her biggest favorites by far was as expected, Signaltin and Koutarou's armor, and the archaeologist girl wouldn't leave their side for a second. Even now she was relishing Signaltin which had been pulled out of its sheath, while drinking her extinct tea in delight.

“... Bertorion, come for a moment.”

Waiting for the girl to get distracted by the items inside the living quarters, Clan called Koutarou over. There was something she wanted to secretly talk about.

“... What?”

Having approached Clan, Koutarou whispered to her. He could tell she wanted to speak in secret from her behavior. The time the two had spent together was quite considerable.

“... It's about that girl's identity.”

“... That girl said she was an archaeologist called Elle but... isn't she?”

When Koutarou and Clan had taken her inside the Cradle, the girl had introduced herself as an archaeologist called Elle. Since he had no particular reason to suspect her, Koutarou honestly believed her.

“... That's right, but she actually has another title.”

“... What do you mean?”

“... Before that, excuse me for a moment.”

“Mhm?”

Before she proceeded, Clan covered Koutarou's mouth with her hands.

“... That girl is Theiamillis's mother.”

“Mmmhhhhhhmm?!”

Just like Clan had expected, Koutarou let out a cry of surprise. That's why, since Clan had taken a preemptive measure, his voice didn't reach princess Elfaria. Clan waited until Koutarou had finished shouting before she let him go.

“... Are you sure?”

“... Yes. Her age fits, she is an archaeologist and her name is Elle. Most of all, she looks just like Theiamillis-san, right? There's no doubt.”

“... That's not good.”

Koutarou understood that this was serious.

If Elle was Theia's mother then it was a very worrying situation.

“... So please be careful about what you say.”

“... I got it, I'll watch out. You be careful too Clan. If you make a miss like before, it might be fatal.”

“... Yes, I'll take it to heart.”

If Elfaria's life changed because of something Koutarou or Clan said, Theia might not ever be born. Or she might call her daughter by a different name. If that happened, they might not be able to return to their own world.

This meeting was directly connected to Theia's life. As a result, there was a large risk involved.

“Reios-sama! Clan-san! What are you talking about?!”

That was when Elfaria approached the two with a smile. She was more interested in Koutarou than Signaltin and the armor. As an archaeologist, and as a girl.

“That's...”

“We were talking about what to do next.”

Koutarou stumbled on the sudden question, but Clan followed up without missing a beat.

“What to do next... by the way, why did you awaken in this age Reios-sama?”

“Actually, our ship is malfunctioning. That's why we were waiting for the part needed to be invented so we could get one.”

“For a part...”

“The problem is how we are supposed to get our hands on that part.”

Clan crossed her arms and furrowed her brows. This was a problem that she had been racking her brain over for quite a while.

“Hm? Can't we just buy it?”

“It's not a part you could just buy.”

“What do you mean? Surely you're not using illegal parts?”

“This one is not! It's just that this part is special, so it's not in circulation. Who knows if we can get our hands on it in this age when we can't reveal our identities.”

“'This is not'?... You mean, you're using other illegal parts?”

“T-That's a past mistake! I don't do that anymore!”

Clan desperately excused herself. In the past, she never hesitated to use illegal products. But now was different. She had matured as a princess.

“I know. Don't get so angry. So what do we do?”

“Well... either we ask someone we can trust... or we'll have to get it illegally...”

Clan was blushing. Since she had just said that she would use illegal means, she was a little embarrassed, even though there might be no other choice.

“Don't worry, Clan. If I ask you, it won't count as illegal. Did you forget about empress Alaia's exception?”

“T-That's right!”

Clan had been more concerned about how Koutarou would think about her than the fact that it was illegal, so she felt relief and regained her smile.

“Reios-sama, you don't have to do something so questionable. There's a better way.”

That was when Elfaria, still smiling, joined the conversation.

“What do you mean?”

“I will help. Despite how I look, I'm quite a lady, so I think I can get my hands of a part for a spaceship.”

Elfaria's real name was Elfaria Kua Forthorthe. She still hadn't gotten the title of Dana which showed that its holder was empress, but she was still the lone daughter of the oldest of the royal families, Mastir. Like Elfaria said, there were few ladies on the same level as her in this galaxy.

Part 5

Koutarou and Clan agreed to Elfaria's suggestion. After discussing the details, Elfaria temporarily returned to town alone. She needed to find stores that had the part in question, and if she didn't return to the hotel she was lodging at, chaos would break out. People would be sent out to search this area.

“Well then, Reios-sama, Clan-sama, see you tomorrow!”

“Yeah.”

“Farewell, Elfaria-san.”

Elfaria would turn around several times and wave her hand as she headed towards the exit to the cave. Koutarou and Clan were seeing her off just outside of the airlock of the Cradle.

“Hey Clan, being a lady sure looks like it has its own share of problems.”

“I can't let that one slide. I'm just as much of a lady as her.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot.”

Those words irritated Clan, but that anger faded away as she looked at Koutarou's face. She understood that he wasn't teasing her; that's why she ate the words she was about to say and replaced them with some others.

“... By the way, Bertorion, should you have made a promise like that?”

“Like what?”

“The compensation for her help. In return for Elfaria-san's help, we'll give her your data. Isn't that too dangerous?”

In exchange for her assistance, Elfaria wanted data on Koutarou. Starting with the records from the past, she also wanted the specs of his armor and its operation data, a 3D model of Signaltin and so on. The data Elfaria wanted covered a lot of ground. Though the promise didn't include information that might change the future, Clan still felt that it was dangerous.

“Even though she might not look all that reliable, Elle is Theia's mother. I want to believe in her.”

Koutarou relaxed his shoulders as he spoke and smiled at Clan. Seeing that smile, Clan recalled Koutarou's family situation. From their long relationship, she had gotten a grasp of his home environment. That's why she could somehow accept his reason for wanting to trust Elfaria, and so she didn't voice any further complaints.

“I'll believe in her too.”

“That's good... That's right, Clan, let's eat.”

Koutarou smiled at Clan and turned around and headed back towards the Cradle. Just as he put his hand on the airlock, he caught a glimpse of the stone monument that had been pushed to the side nearby.

“... Is... that…?”

The stone monument had a familiar crest engraved in it. As Koutarou approached the monument, he removed the sword and sheath hanging off his waist, and placed it next to the crest.

“It is. This is empress Alaia's crest...”

Signaltin had been engraved with Alaia's crest ever since its awakening, and it was the same crest as on the monument.

“What's the matter, Bertorion?”

Noticing Koutarou's behavior, Clan moved up to him.

“Take a look Clan. It looks like her majesty helped us.”

Koutarou made room for Clan so she could look down at the monument alongside him. She then read the ancient language written on it.

“'May the knights who left for the other side of the sky have a peaceful sleep. Let none disturb their sleep', huh...”

“It looks like empress Alaia knew we were here.”

“I'm sure of it. That's why she made this area an inviolable domain...”

“Your majesty...”

Koutarou's chest suddenly heated up and tears formed in his eyes. The bonds they had supposedly left behind 2,000 years ago protected them even now. Koutarou couldn’t remain calm, not after seeing that.

“... Thank you very much, empress Alaia...”

Koutarou squatted down by the stone monument and traced the engraved letters with his finger. As he did, he felt like he could feel Alaia's presence. He was sure she had traced the letters just like he did.

“Hey, Clan...”

“What?”

Clan's voice was surprisingly gentle.

“We have a place we have to return to, and we couldn't change history. That's why... I know we had to do this, but I...”

Koutarou's tears fell on the monument, just above Alaia's crest.

The tears then flowed into the crest and vanished.

“... But... even... even then, it's so lonely...”

“That's... true... Bertorion... I think so too...”

Tears shone behind Clan's glasses. She was confused by her own tears. In the past, she was never one to care about others. That in itself proved that she had formed a tight bond. That's why Clan didn't go against her feelings and simply cried together with Koutarou.

Part 6

Elfaria had witnessed that scene because of her own mistake. She had forgotten the seeds of the tea tree on the table onboard the Cradle. She turned around right away, but her playfulness got the better of her, so she decided to sneak up on the two so she could surprise them.

“... Reios-sama... can you...”

However, just before she was about to jump out, she overheard Koutarou and Clan's conversation. As a result, she understood that now wasn't the time for something like that.

“... only live the fate given to you as well...?”

Elfaria was the crown princess. At this rate, she would eventually bear the fate of becoming the empress. However, she wasn't satisfied with that fate. She wanted to live freely rather than travel down the path laid down for her. That was one of the reasons for why she had devoted herself to her research. When Koutarou had appeared before her, she had hoped that he would be the one to free her from her path.

“... Reios-sama...”

Yet, that Koutarou was yet another one troubled by the path laid down before him. You could say that Elfaria's hopes had been off. She felt disappointed. However at the same time, there was an emotion budding within her. That was sympathy for the suffering Koutarou, and a sense of yearning born from that sympathy.

Part 7

They were using Elfaria's private plane to travel from 'Bertorion's special territory' to the capital of Fornorn. The time it took was less than an hour. Koutarou felt like the distance had been far longer considering the time it had taken on foot.

“To think that long and painful journey could be over in just one hour...”

He couldn't help but feel disappointed. His journey had begun from just before the Mastir checkpoint, crossing the mountains and the checkpoint, cutting across the Mastir territory. They had then forcibly broken through the border from the Pardomshiha territory, pushing forward to what would later be known as 'Bertorion's special territory'. That journey had taken several months, and Koutarou remembered very clearly just how hard it had been.

“It took the same amount of time when we travelled from here to the cave in the Cradle, remember?”

“Back then we were running around all over the place looking for somewhere to hide the Cradle.”

“Reios-sama, look, we can see Fornorn now.”

As they reached Fornorn's airspace, Elfaria ordered her private plane to lower its altitude. The plane dropped below the clouds, allowing them to see Fornorn. It was a massive metropolis filled with skyscrapers. If there was any difference between Fornorn and a major city on Earth, it would be that there was a lot of green. The green that had skillfully been added into the city planning softened the sharpness of the city's atmosphere.

“This is amazing... So, from where to where is Fornorn?”

“Oh silly Reios-sama... everything you can see is Fornorn.”

Elfaria smiled at Koutarou's doubts. She wanted to boast about the large capital, and she also found Koutarou's reaction amusing.

“... Bertorion, that large dome you see over there was built on the ruins of the colosseum. And the largest tower you can see over there is just around the north gate.”

“I got it. Thank you.”

Clan was the one to alleviate Koutarou's doubts. What he wanted to know was how big Fornorn had been 2,000 years ago, and for that, Elfaria's explanation was insufficient.

“To think that Fornorn has turned into this...”

In Koutarou's memories, Fornorn only had buildings made out of brick, stone and wood. At most, the buildings were three stories tall. There were very few actual high-rises.

But in the current Fornorn, high-rises were a natural thing. The tallest, of which there were quite a few, reached over 1,000 meters. What's more is that the construction material had a strange luster to it that he had never seen before. It wasn't made out of concrete which he was familiar with. It looked like a city from the future that he could only see in the movies.

“I guess it was inevitable... It's been 2,000 years since then after all...”

From the sky, Fornorn had no resemblance of its past self. To Koutarou, this was just an unfamiliar futuristic city, and it didn't feel like he had returned to the capital at all. That made Koutarou feel lonely.

“Even though it might not look the same, this is the country that you and Alaia-san protected. This isn't like you Bertorion. It's like a knight getting flustered because the decorations on his sword changed.”

“... What's important is what's inside, huh? You're right. Thank you, Clan.”

Clan's words changed Koutarou's perspective, and as a result, he was able to return to normal.

Reios-sama and Clan-sama sure has a strong bond...

Elfaria was looking at the two and dropped her shoulders.

Elfaria hadn't understood the meaning of Koutarou's question, and she hadn't been able to say anything when she saw him looking so lonely. But Clan had easily found the answer to both. That was only obvious since they had only just met, but she couldn't help but feel depressed considering they were both princesses.

If there are no bonds, then I'll just make some! I won't lose to this fate!

However, Elfaria wasn't one to get discouraged by that. She could take a hit if need be, and while she might not wish for the throne, she had the qualities of an empress.

Part 8

Seeing Fornorn from the surface didn't have the same level of impact as when looking at it from the sky. They couldn't see past the buildings, so the city gave the same impression as a similar city on Earth. Buildings lined up along a wide road with vehicles going up and down it. Of course there was difference in the details, but the overall impression was the same.

"I've somehow managed to calm down."

"Please don't look around so much. You look like a country bumpkin and it's embarrassing."

That might not have been the case when it was just the two of them, but Elfaria was with them now. Clan got a little embarrassed and blushed. She blushed despite Koutarou technically being a stranger.

"Alright, I've ranked up."

"Eh?"

"You used to call me a neanderthal remember? So a country bumpkin is a big step forward."

"Is that true, Clan-san?! How could you say that to Reios-sama?!"

"T-That's not it! That was before I knew who he was!"

The three were currently on the move, having changed their mode of transportation to a car.

While it may be a car, it was far different from the cars on Earth. It didn't need a driver, and the car was floating above the road. It only needed its tires when it stopped or broke down. It ran on electricity, and as a result, the inside of the car was very quiet, with nothing hindering the discussion between the three inside.

“Haah...”

That's why Clan's sigh reached Koutarou as well.

“What's wrong?”

“... Look over there. You can see Schweiger's residence.”

The Schweiger family's residence was inside of Fornorn. It looked like an annexation of large research facilities and could be easily seen, even from afar. The Schweiger residence slowly moved as the car did, and for some reason, Clan seemed to be suffering a little.

“Hey!”

A thud rang out.

“Ow?! What are you doing?!”

“You didn't look like a girl who was finally able to return home after going through a tough journey... now that you've got your energy back, tell me why, Clan.”

“You really are... If you wanted to comfort me, there are softer ways of doing it.”

Clan sent a grudgeful glance at Koutarou. But thanks to him, her painful expression from just a moment ago was gone.

“... This is the world 20 years from the past, right?”

“Supposedly. It only looks like the future to me though.”

“Then grandmother will pass away soon.”

Clan's expression turned a little darker once more. Clan recalled one of her relative's death, and was wondering what to do.

“Do you want to save her?”

In the world of the past, they had tried saving everyone in danger, regardless of history. So comparing that to now, Clan should be allowed to save her grandmother.

“I would like to, but the situation is complicated.”

“What do you mean?”

“Grandmother will die five years from now. Since I know what the disease is called, if I intervene now, it probably won't kill her but... it was a disease caused by age...”

“Natural causes as they call it, huh.”

“Yes. Besides, can we really change history... and grandmother was apparently not very Schweiger like, and after her death, her money was invested into a lot of different funds as according to her will. The number of children that her money saved should be quite considerable.”

“That does make it a difficult decision...”

Clan was worrying because she had a very complicated problem on her hands.

Clan's grandmother would die because it was her time, but Clan felt resistant to simply letting a blood relative pass away.

But there were a lot of lives saved because her grandmother died. Up until the point that she died, Clan's grandmother continued to increase her assets and then donated it all. That's why by saving her now, it would mean that the donation never happened, meaning the lives saved might be lost.

That said, by surviving, Clan's grandmother would be able to increase her assets even further, increasing the donation when she finally does pass away. Overall that would save even more people.

Clan didn't know what to do.

“Alright Clan. Let's just think about it for a while. This might be a distasteful way of putting it, but there's still five years left.”

Koutarou was planning on thinking about the problem for a while. It was a complicated problem, so even Koutarou's ideas might help.

“... You will think about it too?”

Clan was surprised by Koutarou's reaction.

“Yeah. This is what we've done all this time right?”

“That's... true, but...”

Clan had figured that this was her own problem, but Koutarou didn't feel that way, which made Clan happy.

I see... so this is what it means to not be alone...

She had someone she could share her feelings and her future with.

That sensation made Clan's emotions more powerful, and brightness returned to her expression.

Part 9

After getting off the car, Elfaria was leading Koutarou and Clan down an unpopular alley. Past the alley was their destination. It was a shop that Elfaria had used to obtain some research material and the shop might bend a little for their requests. They were planning on having them order in the part they needed for the Cradle.

“Even though science advances, these kinds of alleys have the same feel to them.”

Compared to the futuristic and colorful main roads, this place had a feeling of life to it.

“Geez... again...”

Clan felt embarrassed as she saw Koutarou looking around once more. That was when Elfaria pulled on her sleeve.

“... Uhm, Clan-san.”

“...What?”

Since Elfaria was whispering, Clan whispered right back.

“... Are you and Reios-sama going out?”

However after hearing what Elfaria said next, Clan instinctively raised her voice.

“O-O-Of course not!! We are not!!”

“Hm? What's wrong, Clan.”

Reacting to Clan's shout, Koutarou looked in her direction.

“It's nothing! It's just girl talk!”

“You guys have a lot of those...”

Because of his life with the invader girls, Koutarou knew that it was best not to touch on those kinds of topics. That's why he quickly lost interest in Clan and looked around the area again. Right now, this future city was more important to him.

"... Phew... that surprised me..."

"... You are not going out?"

"...Bertorion and I are just stuck together. Could you not just blurt out something so surprising all of a sudden?"

"... I see, I'm sorry."

"... But, why are you asking about that?"

Clan considered herself and Koutarou as being stuck in the same boat. But she was still interested in this topic.

"... Actually, I wish to go out with Reios-sama."

Elfaria blushed a little as she looked at Koutarou. She was embarrassed, but she didn't try to hide her feelings from Clan. Elfaria was honest with her feelings.

"... Eh?"

In that moment, Clan felt like her heart was being squeezed by someone. She was far more surprised than before, but because it was a different kind of surprise she couldn't let out a shout.

"... I didn't think it would be possible if Reios-sama was going out with Clan-san, but if that's not the case, I have a chance too."

"... Please wait. That man is the Blue Knight, but what's told in the legends is not everything to him."

Clan assumed that Elfaria's words were because of her admiration for the legendary hero. But Clan knew that wasn't all there was to Koutarou. He would worry, suffer and shed tears at times. While he was a legendary hero, he was also a normal person. Any relationship born from admiration would end up with both parties becoming unhappy.

There were also more problems. If Elfaria and Koutarou were to connect, history would greatly change. Also, though Clan herself might not want to admit it, she needed Koutarou. For the problem regarding her grandmother, and for the journey to come. Those complex feelings were what made her try to stop Elfaria's feelings.

“... I know. That's why.”

“... Eh?”

“... That person knows the pain of living in accordance to his fate...”

As Elfaria spoke she had a very serious expression. She had feelings she couldn't abandon.

“... Elfaria-san, you...”

Elfaria knew that Koutarou was suffering, knowing that he wasn't the real Blue Knight, yet taking all the achievements for himself. Knowing that, Clan could no longer oppose Elfaria.

Part 10

After introducing Clan to the shopkeeper, Elfaria returned to the storefront so she could talk to Koutarou who was curiously staring at the items on display.

“As expected from Forthorthe... they're just selling robots like its normal...”

“Welcome customer. I am Weyland, a domestic robot made by DKI. A new model released this spring!”

What interested him the most was a humanoid robot. In the store, there were all kinds of heavy equipment and heavy machinery, with various robots being exhibited. Amongst them, Koutarou was talking to a domestic robot.

“Oh, Reios-sama, do you like robots?”

“Yeah. In our world, fiction regarding robots are very popular with the kids. And when I was small, I loved watching shows where they had people control giant robots to fight monsters.”

“I see... giant robots...”

Elfaria cheerfully smiled. Her chest leaped for joy every time she learned of a part of Koutarou that wasn't part of the Blue Knight, a part that existed outside of the path set for him.

“How regrettable. It seems that I cannot live up to the customer's expectations.”

Meanwhile, the robot called Weyland dropped its shoulders, its reaction was quite the opposite of Elfaria's.

“What kind of robot are you?”

“I was made to perform chores for people too busy to do them themselves. Our company has always been distant from the war industries, so when it comes to domestic use we are the best.”

“Sorry, but we're doing okay on our chores.”

Koutarou remembered the faces of the people in room 106. In that room, they didn't need a robot to help with the chores. While the two haniwas were technically robots, their main job was playing with Koutarou and the others.

“That's a shame.”

“That's right. I will do the chores, Reios-sama doesn't need a robot.”

“You will? Why?”

“Silly Reios-sama, what are you saying? That's a wife's job isn't it? Fufufufu.”

Elfaria laughed with an innocent expression. It was the smile of a high class young wife.

“Elle, when did you become my wife?”

Koutarou felt a headache coming on. But on the other hand, it reminded him of talking with Sanae, Yurika or Kiriha, and his feelings turned more positive. He felt a little lonely having remembered the girls of room 106, but he felt didn't feel too bad. If he excluded the part about the wife.

“Just a while ago. I made that decision.”

“Without even asking me?”

“I believe fate is something you take into your own hands.”

Elfaria asserted herself, showing a princess-like expression for a moment. Elfaria was going to use any means necessary to become Koutarou's wife.

“Don't take my fate into your hands as well.”

“Do you hate me?”

“That's not it.”

“Then there's no problem. I'm confident I'll make a great wife.”

Elfaria placed her hands on her chest and nodded. Just like she said, her expression was overflowing with confidence.

“There are major problems!”

“Reios-sama, if you marry me, you'll obtain half the galaxy! I think that's a great deal!”

“You idiot!”

A thud could be heard.

“Stop spouting things a villain in a movie would say! Treasure yourself more!”

Koutarou had a place he had to return to and a reason for it. He was also bothered by Elfaria's behavior. Suddenly being approached with marriage from someone he had just met was something hard for Koutarou to accept. So his fist instinctively struck out.

“Ehehehe~”

Yet for some reason, Elfaria was smiling as she stroked her recently struck forehead.

“W-What?”

Sensing something ominous from her smile, Koutarou took a few steps backwards, retreating. Elfaria responded by stepping forward three steps and looking up at Koutarou up close.

“Reios-sama, you finally hit me.”

“What about it?”

“I already know that Reios-sama only hits someone he really hates or someone he thinks of more than a friend. Fufufu, now I'm one step closer.”

Koutarou would say harsh things to Clan and sometimes even make use of light violence. But that hadn't been the case with Elfaria who he had just met. In that case, Elfaria had realized in a short amount of time that she needed to become someone worth hitting in order to get along better with Koutarou.

“Come on now...”

“Despite how I look, I'm good at laying down groundwork and creating established facts.”

Seeing Koutarou instinctively drop his shoulders, Elfaria showed a proud-looking smile. She was seriously trying to become Koutarou's wife.

Elfaria and Koutarou were both troubled by having to travel down the path laid down for them. Elfaria wanted to join hands with Koutarou and jump off that path together.

Part 11

After finishing their arrangements regarding the part they needed, Koutarou and the others went out to purchase food and water. After thi,s they would return to 'Bertorion's special territory'. They were going to wait on the Cradle until the part they needed could be obtained. This was the past for Koutarou and Clan, so they didn't want to carelessly walk around and accidentally change history.

“Is this the last of it?”

“There's one more box, but I'll carry it, so the box you're carrying is the last.”

“Give that to me too. I'll put it above the one I'm carrying.”

“It's okay, this is nothing.”

“Clan, you can return to being a princess when you're on familiar grounds.”

“That's right Clan-san. Leave this to the married couple.”

“Ah, hey, Elfaria-san?!”

Koutarou and the others were in the parking lot, loading the goods they purchased into their car. They were being quite noisy, having already

gotten used to one another, and since a while back, Clan and Elfaria had been having a girl talk.

I'm sure neither of them have someone they can discuss their true feelings with...

Koutarou believed that their meeting had been a positive one. In the hierarchical society of Forthorthe, princesses were normally rivals. But because the two were from different ages, they didn't have any sort of rivalry between them. Because of that, they both understood each other's worries and were able to sympathize with one another. They would eventually get separated by time, so there was little they couldn't discuss with one another. Clan only had to worry about not passing on too much information about the future. In other words, it was the perfect situation to befriend one another. That's why Koutarou left them be, even if they collided a little.

"Clan-san is a princess. I am Reios-sama's wife. My husband's luggage is my luggage. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing's right with it! I can't have another princess carry my luggage! I especially don't want to become indebted to the Mastir family!"

"It's okay, I'm soon to become part of the Bertorion family or the Satomi family."

"That's not the problem! My pride won't allow it!"

"Wait up you two. Let's just leave it at that."

However, Koutarou suddenly broke the two up.

"Okay, Reios-sama."

"No, I won't wait— what's wrong, Bertorion?"

Unlike Elfaria who obediently stopped, Clan was too excited. However, when she saw Koutarou's serious expression, she understood that something was up and got serious as well. His expression at the time was the kind of expression he would show when an enemy had come.

“People are coming. There’s probably three of them.”

“Are they enemies?”

“I can't tell. There's no murderous intent, but I feel hostility.”

Koutarou could use the spiritual powers Sanae had given him, but since he had been separated from Sanae for so long, those powers were growing weak. He couldn't see auras as clearly as he could in the past. That's why he didn't notice the mysterious people approaching until they were quite close.

“It's them.”

“That's the imperial military uniform. And it seems like all three of them are quite high ranked... What is the meaning of this?”

Three men wearing military uniforms were approaching them, and they were clearly hostile. The part that Clan bought using Elfaria's name was not illegal, so it wasn't something that should attract the military's attention. The only other possibility in Koutarou's mind was that the Cradle had been found. But Elfaria quickly denied that possibility.

“I'm sorry, Reios-sama and Clan-san. Those people are here for me.”

Elfaria was watching the men with a sharp look. Her back was straight and her expression was serious. It was as if the carefreeness from before was just a dream. It was the first time Koutarou and Clan saw Elfaria acting like a princess.

Part 12

Knowing that the approaching men were from the military, Elfaria left Koutarou and Clan behind her and stepped forward alone. This was both to conceal who Koutarou and Clan were, and because she knew that it wouldn't be dangerous despite their hostility.

“What business do you have with me? I don't have any recollection of calling for the military.”

Elfaria's voice echoed off the walls of the parking lot. With few other people and cars around, her voice reached far.

“We have come because we have business with you.”

The person in the middle of the three men answered. He was the highest ranking of the three and acted as their leader.

“I can't ignore that. If the military is coming into contact with a princess during her private time for an arbitrary reason, they would have to take responsibility.”

“Worry not. We won't have to take any responsibility from just your testimony. We are currently doing desk work right now after all.”

“Nonsense...”

Elfaria's stare grew sharper.

Is the military running wild...?

Looking at how Elfaria and the men were acting, Koutarou was getting a rough understanding of the situation. The military was moving away from the empress' and the congress' control and acting on their own. Even the most well-constructed organization would start distorting after 2,000 years. The current military was far different from the military that Koutarou and Alaia had led in the past.

“You have drowned in your power and haven't noticed that you are out of control.”

“I can assure you that we are not out of control. We are acting under proper management.”

“Someone never using the break can't tell if it's broken.”

“Let's stop with this meaningless chatter, princess. This topic will never lead us anywhere. There's something else more important now, is there not?”

The man grinned and one-sidedly ended their current topic, switching to another. There was no respect towards the princess in his appearance. In fact, it was as if he was looking down on her.

“Now that would be meaningless. I have no intention of withdrawing my statement for the military to disarm.”

“Surely you can do something, princess Elfaria. Wouldn't it be easy? Your highness won't get in our way, and we won't get in yours.”

“You are already in the way, yet you say you won't? You jest.”

Elfaria laughed, but her eyes were the opposite. She only laughed as a tactic, and as she did, the man's expression changed.

“We don't want to do anything violent! You are the next in line for the throne after all!”

He couldn't stand the sight of a girl younger than him laughing at him. His brutal nature appeared on the surface, and he spoke to Elfaria in a low and deep voice. The men's goal was to threaten Elfaria.

“How unsightly. The military top brass has sent you several times because they fear me. Threatening me now is surely meaningless.”

But Elfaria didn't falter. She maintained her smile and stared at the men with cold eyes.

“You brat, don't get so full of yourself!”

“Look, you're already out of control. What happened to your proper management?”

“Kuh.”

The man mortifyingly grinded his teeth. He had lost the moment he lost his temper.

“Go back to where you came from. And tell the top that Forthorthe's royalty won't yield to anyone.”

The winner was Elfaria Kua Forthorthe.

Though young, she was a prideful royalty of Forthorthe.

Part 13

After the men had left, Elfaria maintained a serious expression for a while. The expression she had with Koutarou and Clan had vanished somewhere. That expression remained on her face even after they returned to 'Bertorion's special territory', and for the rest of the day.

“... I'm starting to understand how it's all fitting together...”

Clan looked at Elfaria's back as she was leaving and sadly muttered. Clan had understood how Elfaria felt.

“...That person knows the pain of living in accordance to his fate...”

That's why Elfaria had said about Koutarou back in Fornorn. But looking at it from the other end, it meant that she did as well.

Elfaria-san has been after a life that's different from the life of an empress all this time, but fate won't allow it. If she didn't become empress, a princess not in favor of the military disarmament would become empress and the military would continue to run wild. She is trapped between two different lives. So with Bertorion appearing, it is only obvious that she would fall for him...

If Elfaria didn't become empress, the military might cause something irreparable. But at the same time, that meant giving up the life she wanted. What Elfaria needed to do and what she wanted to do were complete opposites.

"Elle is in a tough spot... Just like empress Alaia..."

Koutarou also understood that Elfaria held contradicting emotions. Alaia had been the same. Alaia wanted to avenge her parents, but at the same time she was trying to give up on that for the sake of her people. It was because Koutarou had seen Alaia like that up close that he was able to understand how Elfaria felt.

"What's the matter?"

"Let's have Elle do what she wants. She probably..."

"... You're right..."

Elfaria was moving further and further away from Koutarou and Clan. After waving at them one last time, she left the cave.

"... Hey, Bertorion."

"Hm?"

"After seeing her, I've made up my mind as well."

Clan turned to Koutarou and clasped her hands in front of her chest. A strong determination shone in her eyes. Clan had reached a decision as a princess.

“I will leave grandmother be.”

Clan said with firm determination.

“Are you fine with that?”

“Yes. I think saving people who have reached the end of their life is going too far. She is certainly someone I want to meet, but...”

Clan's voice gradually grew quieter as she looked down on the ground. As a relative of hers, it wasn't something easy for her. But she soon looked back up, the will behind her eyes still present.

“I really don't think time travel should be intentionally taken advantage of.”

“You mean don't travel through time without a purpose?”

“Yes. I believe the policy we had in the past is correct. Time travel should only be used to return to your own world. But if you come across someone in trouble in the process, you help them.”

Koutarou and Clan didn't want to change history, but they couldn't overlook tragedies occurring right in front of them. That's how they had acted in Forthorthe 2,000 years ago. And that same line of thinking was needed now as well.

“If not, we'll never be able to return home. Who knows how much time it would take to resolve everything happening around us.”

Koutarou and Clan knew of a lot that would happen in these next 20 years. If they wanted, they could probably prevent a lot of those incidents. But as a

result, history would become a mess, and the two would be unable to return home.

“Time travelling sure is difficult...”

“Normally, this is the goddess of dawn's domain.”

“That's right, you and I aren't gods. We should respect the people earnestly living in their respective age.”

There was another problem apart from changing history.

Koutarou and Clan knew a lot about what would happen, but the people alive right now didn't, and they were working towards an outcome they desired. Having people that know about the results intervening would stomp on the intentions of all those people. Your dream won't come true. It's a waste of time so go do something else. Koutarou's and Clan's actions would be the same thing as saying that.

On top of that, there was a limit to how much time Koutarou and Clan had, they couldn't resolve everything that would happen. They would have to choose what to intervene with. It would probably be a decision that affected a lot of lives. Which meant that Koutarou and Clan would have to choose which lives to save. Could they decide the value of each life. Everyone only had one shot at life, and they were equally important. Yet Koutarou's and Clan's interventions would break that obvious rule.

“Clan, you're not wrong. You're just human.”

“Thank you, Bertorion. I feel like some of the weight has fallen off my shoulders because you said that.”

It was a difficult problem to anyone. This was the first time in history humanity had been faced with the worries of a god. It couldn't be helped

that they couldn't reach a perfect answer to that worry. Koutarou and Clan weren't almighty gods after all.

Part 14

The several days it had taken for the ordered part to arrive had passed peacefully. In the morning, Elle would visit the Cradle, and after staying with them until the evening, she would go home. There was also a time where she had stayed. Like that, the three spent the time in a fashion suitable for their age.

“Reios-sama, let's go take a look at our wedding hall.”

“Oh yeah, where does Forthorthe hold their weddings?”

“Normally it's at a temple, in front of the goddess.”

“The goddess of dawn?”

“That's right. However, as life became more modern, it's become more common to use hotel rooms decorated similar to a temple, or similar venues. With the increase in population, there aren't enough temples to cover all of the weddings.”

“Well that makes sense, Fornorn is amazing.”

“Our ceremony will of course take place in the temple dedicated to Signaltin.”

“Nobody is allowed to enter that place.”

“We only need Clan-san to attend. Now, let's go and have our wedding!”

“Wait, weren't you just going to see it?!”

Part 15

“What does this food taste like?”

“Well, you'll just have to find out.”

“Alright, let's give it a try.”

“Bertorion, if you eat that many at the—”

“*cough* *cough* *cough*, what the, it's spicy?!”

“Ahahah, here, Reios-sama, some water.”

“T-Thanks... *cough*... that's just foul play, something that looked like this on earth would definitely be sweet.”

“It because you ate so many.”

“If you knew about it, you should have stopped me.”

“You shoved them all in your mouth before I could.”

“...A-Anyways, Elle.”

“Yes.”

A thud rang out.

“Ow?! Why did you hit me?!”

“You did it on purpose didn't you. This water is all the proof I need.”

“Ahahaha, c-o-r-r-e-c-t.”

Another thud could be heard.

Part 16

“Could I stay over today?”

“Are you sure? Won't everyone worry?”

“I've already let them know that I'm not returning for the day because of fieldwork.”

“Seriously, you sure came prepared... Well, I don't have any complaints.”

“Alright! Reios-sama, let me hear all of your wonderful stories tonight.”

“I don't mind, but... why are you putting your luggage in my room?”

“Eh? If we're not in the same bed, how am I supposed to listen to your stories?”

“Sleep in the room next door!”

“You're telling your wife to sleep in another room?! Is the marriage going down hill already?!”

“Stop playing around and go!”

“Oka~y.”

“Seriously, what a girl.”

“Clan, you should stop talking and chase after her.”

“Why?”

“Elle is carrying her luggage into your room.”

“Alright!! This room is a goldmine!!”

“Heee~y!!”

Part 17

“Clan, aim to kill okay?”

“That's the plan. Ah, but aren't your spiritual powers weakening.”

“Probably.”

“Reios-sama, can I shoot instead of Clan?”

“No you can't.”

“Eeeh?! Why not?!”

“Why?... You only think about playing tricks right?”

“Spiritual powers tells you that too?!”

“I can tell even without!”

“Then we're understanding each other!”

“...You sure are gutsy, Elfaria-san...”

“Could this be the bond between a husband and wife?!”

“You idiot!”

Part 18

As the three began feeling like it wouldn't be too bad if days like these continued, Elfaria got a call saying that the part she had ordered had arrived at her hotel.

“What's the matter Elfaria-san? Bad news?”

“No, I got a call that the part we ordered has arrived...”

Elfaria realized that they would part ways soon enough, and with that her happy feelings turned into loneliness. The magic vanished in an instant.

“I see...”

The same was true for Clan. Because it had been so fun, it was hard to part ways. Considering Elfaria's emotions, Clan had a hard time getting

motivated. Koutarou and Clan might be able to meet Elfaria again soon enough, but to Elfaria it would be more than 20 years. The problem with time traveling presented itself yet again.

“Reios-sama, I got a call saying that the part has arrived. I will go pick it up now.”

“I see...”

Koutarou was in the middle of cooking as Elfaria stepped in and told him that they would soon part ways. Koutarou stopped what he was doing as he was filled with loneliness. He had parted ways with Alaia and Charl before, so his feelings were complex. That's why words unlike what he normally used left his mouth.

“...Elle, you can leave the part for later. When it's time for you to leave for the day, let's go together, all three of us.”

“Reios-sama... are you sure?”

“Yeah. We need to hurry in order to not change history, but a few hours isn't going to change that. It'll just change when we leave.”

“I am in favor too. We should atleast have enough time to eat, drink tea, talk and say goodbye to the people we've met.”

“Those are quite illogical words for a member of the logical Schweiger family.”

“I'm sure I've taken after grandmother.”

“Fufu, did your grandmother try to kill Reios-sama as well?”

“Of course not, geez...”

Even though the part had arrived, the three didn't leave immediately to go get it. They were going to pick it up together with Elfaria as she left them for the day. Now was time for dinner, they still had several hours left. They weren't trying to use that remaining time for something special. The several day long holiday the three had would just continue like normal. Koutarou and Clan figured that misusing time travel for something like this should be forgivable.

Part 19

However, there were some that did not forgive Koutarou and the other's peaceful time together. After the clock passed 4PM and the sun was starting to set. They came.

“Damnit!”

Koutarou was the first to notice their approach, and he slammed his fists into the table with anger.

“Reios-sama? Did you not like the snacks?”

“What's the matter, Bertorion?”

Elfaria and Clan were taken aback by Koutarou's sudden action and started at him with surprise.

“It's the enemy! I'm not sure on their exact numbers but I think there's 5 or 6 of them. They're headed this way from the entrance of the cave.”

Koutarou sensed several murderous intents closing in. This was actual murderous intent unlike the hostility he had felt from the military men the other day. As a result, even though Koutarou's powers were growing weaker he promptly noticed their existence.

“Please wait... I've confirmed it with the Cradle's sensors as well! There are six of them! They are headed this way fully equipped!”

Using the Cradle's sensors, Clan confirmed that there were six men. Their movements were precise and organized, most likely trained soldiers. Their equipment consisted of a rifle and black body armor. They were quite clearly a combat squad.

While it might be small, they were a bit too few to attack the Cradle. But that was only obvious, they hadn't expected to find a spaceship here. They had only assumed it was a dig site. In other words—

“They're here to kill me. They're most likely illegal mercenaries sent by the military.”

Their target was Elfaria. Six men was more than enough to attack her. The military took this as a golden opportunity and sent in illegal soldiers. In order for Elfaria to get her excavation approved she entered 'Bertorion's special territory' alone in order to create an established fact. Thanks to that, there was no one but Elfaria around, and nobody was aware of her exact location. Killing her now wouldn't leave any evidence behind. Following the spaceship part, they identified Elfaria's hotel and they had then tracked her down to this cave.

“It's been 2,000 years since then...”

“Reios-sama?”

“It's been 2,000 years, and you still won't stop fighting...”

Koutarou slowly got up from his seat. He was fuming. He could never find it in him to forgive those that would do with Forthorthe as they pleased after he and Alaia had desperately protected it.

“...Clan, could you prepare my sword and armor.”

“I understand. Bertorion, show them the power of the legendary Blue Knight.”

Koutarou believed that after 2,000 years had passed, the legendary hero could be dismissed.

However, that was a mistake.

The legend of the Blue Knight was about to continue after 2,000 years.

Part 20

Elfaria's first impression of the Blue Knight in the flesh was that he was beautiful. The armor had a vivid blue color, on his waist hung two swords, silver and gold colored. On his chest was an insignia made from wood and wool. However, the armor had been through many fierce fights and showed signs of severe damage, with several large dents. The mantle on his back was also dirty, and so were the swords. The silver and gold shine had lost much of its luster.

“...So that's Reios-sama... the real Blue Knight...”

However, Elfaria was shaken just from looking at Koutarou walking. He was a real knight, something very rare these days. Seeing that, Elfaria felt his existence itself was beautiful.

“He's completely different from his normal self right?”

“Yes...”

It wasn't his appearance that was beautiful. Koutarou was a normal boy, and the armor he was wearing was dirty. But his dignified behavior and his overwhelming willpower were so knight-like it transcended the beauty of

his appearance and moved those who were watching him. He was the image of the ideal knight.

“But will he be fine? He's going up against six people.”

“There's no need to worry. When he's making that face, Bertorion won't lose to anyone.”

As Elfaria and Clan watched over him, Koutarou pulled out one of the swords from his waist. He was holding a silvery white sword, it was the proof of him being the guardian of Forthorthe. It was the sword of sovereignty, Signaltin.

“Just watch how the legendary knight who protected Forthorthe alongside the Silver Princess fights...”

As if he was waiting for Clan to finish speaking, Koutarou charged towards the soldiers. Koutarou's only weapon was his sword. Looking at it normally, he wouldn't stand a chance against six fully armed men. However, neither Clan nor Koutarou had any doubt of their victory.

Part 21

The Blue Knight held a special meaning to the people of Forthorthe. But in the end, the Blue Knight was someone who lived 2,000 years ago. It was unthinkable to believe that he would just suddenly appear in front of someone. That's why when the six soldiers saw Koutarou, they assumed he was just a deranged Blue Knight maniac.

“Hey now, that armor has seen better days.”

“He must have played around in that armor for quite a long time.”

“But it's well made. Even I might want to play around in that armor.”

“Stop spouting nonsense and kill him. Even though he's crazy, a witness is a witness.”

“Hey everyone, aim for his head. I want to take that armor back home with me.”

“Sheesh, guess it can't be helped...”

This carelessness was their first and biggest mistake. They should have attacked Koutarou the moment they saw him. But they had underrated him. On top of that, they had never imagined that he would be completely aware of their positions and behavior. As a result, Koutarou was the one to make the first move.

“Uwaaaaaaaaaaa!!”

All of a sudden the man in the front was blown away. He lost his consciousness after being bathed in an intense shockwave and collapsed to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut.

“Huh?! What just happened?!”

Yet the men didn't know what had happened. They only understood the situation after Koutarou attacked the second one.

“It's him?! The Blue Knight maniac— uaaaaaahhh!!”

The second man repeatedly fired his rifle. The soldiers were using beam rifles, firing beams at an incredible speed. On top of that they were in close quarters. Normally it would be completely unavoidable.

“Phew.”

Koutarou exhaled a small breath and twisted his body. As he did, all the beams passed by him. It was like he knew where the beams would travel beforehand.

“They won't hit. They won't hit! The beams won't—”

After passing through the beams, Koutarou casually swung his left fist at the man. When it collided with him, the electricity built up within his gauntlet zapped the man, knocking him out immediately.

“F-Fire! Fire!!”

“Damnit! That damn joke of a kid!”

Having lost two of their men, the remaining soldiers finally realized that they weren't going up against a normal opponent, and they hurriedly turned their guns on Koutarou.

“...If you were going to fire, you should have done so sooner.”

The next moment the men were deprived of their sight. That was because a small globe that had rolled up to their feet was spewing out smoke at a fierce rate. It was one of Clan's custom made smoke grenades, and the heat of the smoke nullified the soldiers thermal vision. It was a very simple make, but it proved quite effective in a modern battle.

“Damnit, a smokescreen!”

The four men hurriedly threw away their thermal vision goggles and attempted to get out of the smoke. ”But they can't see through the smoke either! Don't panic and just get out of the smoke!”

“Uwaaaaaa?!”

However, to Koutarou who could see the enemy's aura, it was as if there was no smoke to begin with. As the men tried to escape the smoke, they lost another ally. But their misfortune did not end there.

“Captain! The enemy!”

“What? There are three of him?!”

Standing in front of the three men as they escaped the smoke were three Koutarou. And all three Koutarou attacked the men at the same time.

“It doesn't matter how many there are! Kill them!”

“U-Understood!”

The men repeatedly fired their rifles, each attacking the Koutarou in front of them. The three Koutarou's struck by the beams vanished like smoke. They were all illusions created by magic.

“They're gone?!”

“Holograms?!”

While the three men were distracted by the illusions, the fourth Koutarou that had been hiding snuck up on them.

“You should have wondered why I was relying on a heated smokescreen.”

The fourth Koutarou swung his sword with both hands, sending two of the remaining three men flying, and just like the first man, they rolled onto the ground and lost consciousness.

The first three Koutarou were illusions created by Signaltin. However, they weren't advanced enough to produce a heat reaction, so there was a risk that the men might see through them with their thermal vision. So firstly the heated smokescreen was needed. Once they removed their goggles,

everything had gone according to Koutarou's plan. And while the men were distracted by the illusions, the real Koutarou attacked. Attacking a defenseless opponent was child's play to him.

“W-Who are you?!”

All that remained was one man, the leader of the group. He was a skilled shooter, but on his own he couldn't hurt Koutarou. The armor's barrier was going strong and Koutarou could see through his aim with his spiritual powers. He no longer stood a chance against Koutarou and repeatedly fired as he slowly retreated.

“Who? I'm just a Blue Knight maniac like you said. But I might have gone a little too far.”

“Why are you siding with that girl?! What benefits could you possible get?!”

“Why is only obvious. Aren't I dressed as the Blue Knight? Of course I'll protect the princess. I'm stupid after all.”

Koutarou walked up to the man and casually punched him in the gut, knocking the last man to the ground. A long time had passed since he parted with the girls of room 106, and the powers he had borrowed were growing weaker, but even then he had come out victorious unharmed. The fight ended precisely how Koutarou and Clan had expected.

Part 22

The replacing of the part only took a few minutes. It was operating fine, and it had been confirmed that there should be no problems returning to Earth. That solved the problem with the Cradle. Only one other problem remained.

“Reios-sama, Clan-san. Thank you for everything up until today. Thanks to you I've made up my mind.”

Elfaria was saying her farewells before Koutarou and Clan would depart. In the end, she had chosen to not go with them.

“I think I should become the empress of Forthorthe.”

“I see... I thought you might.”

“So you knew.”

“I've seen the appearances of princesses making important decisions before after all.”

“Reios-sama is the Blue Knight after all. Fufufu...”

Elfaria cheerfully narrowed her eyes. She no longer had any hesitation. She had decided to live on Forthorthe as the empress.

“But Elfaria-san, why did you decide to become the empress? I thought you didn't want to walk down the path laid down for you.”

“You're right, I wanted to break free from my fate and struggled to do so. But I also wondered if this was a path that I needed to stick on. That's why I studied the Blue Knight and the Silver Princess.”

“To find out how they acted when faced with a similar choice?”

“Yes.”

Should she live her own life, or should she live for the sake of her people as the empress.

Elfaria didn't know what to choose, that's why she sought for the answer in the chronicles of the Blue Knight and the Silver Princess.

“And when I wasn't getting anywhere with my research I met the real Reios-sama.”

“So that's why... weren't you disappointed?”

“A little. But that's why I fell in love with Reios-sama. Because I knew he struggled against his own fate like me.”

Koutarou hadn't been able to give Elfaria the answer she sought for. Because he had only walked down the path chosen for the Blue Knight, he hadn't made any heroic decisions of his own. But the hardships he suffered allowed Elfaria to sympathize with him. She hadn't found her answer, but she began feeling like they could look for it together.

“That's why I was serious when I said I wanted to go out with you and marry you, Reios-sama. I seriously wanted to escape the path laid down for me together with you.”

“Then why did you give up on that?”

“Rather than giving up, it's because I couldn't give up I think.”

Elfaria smiled, she had the expression of someone that had given up.

“You couldn't give up?”

“Yes. I love you, Reios-sama. That's why I want to protect Forthorthe like you despite your worrying.”

If they were going to hold hands, they needed to protect the same things.

In other words, after learning that Koutarou worried about the same things she did and falling for him, Elfaria's path was sealed.

“Even if I must walk down the path in front of me, I get to decide how I walk. I was able to find a way of walking that I could accept.”

“I see... then your research is finished, isn't it, Elfaria-san.”

Hearing the conclusion that Elfaria had reached, Clan smiled.

“Eh?”

Clan then brought her mouth to Elfaria's ear and whispered so only she could hear.

“...The Silver Princess thought the same way you did and continued to protect Forthorthe...”

“...Then the Silver Princess really did...?”

“...Love Bertorion, yes, despite knowing that he was a fake... no, it might be because she knew he was a fake, just like you...”

Clan smiled once more as she said that. Tears began forming in Elfaria's eyes. All kinds of feelings were being stirred up inside of her. It wasn't just feelings directed towards Koutarou, but also feelings for the Silver Princess, and for Clan.

“Thank you, Clan-san.”

“Y-You don't need to thank me.”

Clan started blushing. Having lived her life by keeping people at a distance, she wasn't used to gratitude.

“I think I could be allowed to say thanks to friends who worry for me.”

“Friends... then. Thank you, Elfaria-san.”

Finally the two shook hands. Clan was looking away with a blush, but her feelings were properly conveyed to Elfaria.

“Reios-sama.”

After having said her farewells to Clan, Elfaria turned to Koutarou. It was their turn now.

“I'm repeating myself, but thank you very much for everything up until today. I will never forget these days we've spent together.”

“Become a great empress. That's what both I and empress Alaia wish for.”

“Yes.... fufufu.”

While listening to Koutarou's words of encouragement, Elfaria nodded and laughed. Since this wasn't something you laughed at, Koutarou looked at her perplexed.

“What is it?”

“I was just thinking that if you had said that at the very start, it might have only taken five minutes.”

“This kind of thing is something you have to decide for yourself.”

Koutarou firmly believed that everyone decided their own path in life.

“Fufufu, that might be true for men... but unexpectedly, to us women it's not so true.”

Elfaria believed that she would walk down the path shown to her by the person she loved.

“It's true for women to.”

Koutarou was adamant. This stubbornness would later go on to make Ruth cry, but Elfaria only laughed.

“Oh my, fufufu...”

“Can you understand my hardship, Elfaria-san?”

“...Fufufu, I'm starting to.”

After laughing together with Clan for a while, Elfaria turned back towards Koutarou. There was something she wanted to ask him.

“Reios-sama, can I just ask you one last thing?”

“Yeah, what?”

“If I asked you to take me with you, what would you have done?”

If Elfaria hadn't chosen the life as the empress.

And instead chose to walk alongside Koutarou.

Elfaria wanted to know what Koutarou would have done then.

“That wouldn't happen.”

However, Koutarou shook his head.

“Elle, you were a proper princess of Forthorthe since we first met. That's why no matter how much you joke around, in the end you would have chosen this.”

“Reios-sama...”

Tears formed in Elfaria's eyes. Her smile collapsed and tears streamed down her cheeks.

“...Thank you very much, Reios-sama. I will forever take pride in those words...”

So the time for Koutarou and Clan to part ways with Elfaria came.

Koutarou and Clan headed for Earth while Elfaria became the empress.

They wouldn't reunite until another 20 years.

But despite all that time, the bond between them never weakened.

Part 23

A mellow smell of tea filled room 106. It was an rare smell considering the tea they normally drank. And the person preparing that tea was someone rarely seen in room 106.

“Please just wait a little longer, Reios-sama.”

“It's okay, let's take it slow, it's the weekend after all.”

Elfaria was sitting on the opposite end of the tea table to Koutarou. She was the one preparing the tea.

It was Sunday today and all of the girls had left to go buy swimsuits, leaving only Koutarou behind. As he was pondering what to do, Elfaria appeared. Seeing that he seemed to be free, Elfaria prepared him some tea.

“Oh yeah, there was something I wanted to ask you.”

Koutarou and Elfaria were rarely alone together. Since Theia or Ruth were always with her, there were several things he wanted to ask but couldn't. Fortunately, neither of them were here, giving them a chance to talk.

“I don't mind, as long as it's not about my age.”

Elfaria casually nodded whilst looking at the tea leaves stirring up inside of the glass pot. Elfaria had nothing to hide from Koutarou either, apart from her age.

“What is Theia's dad doing right now?”

Koutarou had heard about Theia's mother, Elfaria, before, but he had never heard about her father. That's why he had always been interested, but he didn't know if it was something he could ask Theia. So Elfaria was the better one to ask.

“Theia doesn't have a father.”

Elfaria shook her head.

“What do you mean?”

“I had a fiance determined for me, but he died of an accident before we married. ...So his sperm that had been cryopreserved just in case was used for artificial insemination.”

“So that's why... no wonder she never mentioned her father.”

“Yes... that's why I believe I've made her feel lonely all this time.”

Elfaria had raised Theia on her own. Since she was the empress as well, raising a child was incredibly difficult. That's why she had collided with Koutarou and the others. If it wasn't for Ruth, who knows what would have happened. Elfaria regretted that.

“But that's not the case anymore. You're here, and she's made friends.”

“Yes. While this might be imprudent to say in this situation, having been chasen out of my country... I am incredibly happy to be able to see Theia smile like that.”

Elfaria smiled, her eyes turned gentle. She was looking at Koutarou, but he felt like Elfaria was only thinking of Theia at the moment.

“Can I ask you something else?”

“Yes.”

Elfaria rubbed her eyes and nodded. She hadn't cried because she was unhappy so her expression was bright.

“Was it your doing that caused Theia to come to this room?”

This was another thing that he was curious about.

It was unthinkable to believe that the daughter of his friend from the past had come to this room for her trial by just by pure chance, especially since the trial was decided at random by a computer.

“Yes. I sent Theia here, because I knew you would be here.”

Elfaria easily confirmed Koutarou's suspicions.

“Why did you do that?”

“There were two reasons.”

Elfaria raised two fingers and showed Koutarou.

“The first was the protect Theia. By having her by your side, I was hoping that you would protect her.”

“That sounds like you.”

Koutarou could understand the reason clearly. If it was Elfaria's daughter, Koutarou would protect her unconditionally. That said, Koutarou had already formed a bond with Theia before he met Elfaria.

“And the other reason was... revenge on Reios-sama, perhaps.”

“Revenge?”

Koutarou's voice unexpectedly faltered as he had been too surprised by what Elfaria said. She then puffed up her cheeks, played with her hair and glared at Koutarou with a grudge.

“Reios-sama was my first love. But I happened to overhear you and Clan-san speaking, and you called me 'Theia's mother'. With that my first love came to an end. Isn't that a cruel story?”

Koutarou had referred to Elfaria as 'Theia's mother'. Since Koutarou had no intention of changing history he couldn't be with Elfaria. And before long, her first love ended.

“So as revenge for that, you sent Theia?”

“Don't you think being both mother's and daughter's first love is wonderful?”

Trying to make Koutarou pay for what he did, Elfaria wanted him to chose Theia. If they became lovers then the total score would end at a +/-0, from there she would use her position as mother-in-law to trouble Koutarou.

“...I feel sorry for Theia.”

“There's no need to worry. She became a Blue Knight maniac even without my intervention. I guess it was destiny. All I did was make sure so that her trial became the invasion of this room.”

Elfaria had sent Theia to room 106 in order to protect her, and to get revenge at Koutarou. As a result, she was protected from the out of control military, and she had taken place inside of Koutarou's heart. Elfaria's plan was proceeding smoothly.

“Thanks to Reios-sama I could focus on trying to disarm the military without worries. My daughter was my weakness after all.”

“I'm not even so sure on that disarmament statement.”

“On what grounds can you say that?”

Elfaria pouted again, she felt like her senses from 20 years ago were coming back a little.

“Who would believe that someone that made ridiculous spaceship was for disarmament?”

To Koutarou, the Blue Knight didn't look like it was made by someone who wished for disarmament. It only looked like a brutal weapon specialized in mobility and attack power.

“That ship has several safeties on it.”

“Did you disable those?”

“That's not what I mean. That ship is a power that can never be misused.”

Elfaria showed a boasting smile.

“It can't be misused?”

Not following, Koutarou urged Elfaria to explain.

“Yes. Reios-sama's aspirations is the first safety. Then Theia and Ruth who are on the same wavelength as you are needed for offense and defense. On top of that, only you can maintain your power. If any of that is missing, that ship will perform below average. Everyone has to be united under one cause. There's no weapon that can be misused less than this.”

“...Now that you mention it, your enemies were those who misused power.”

“Yes.”

Elfaria's enemies were those that who lost control of themselves in their desire to increase their power without even noticing. Compared to that, the Blue Knight's power could be controlled. As long as Koutarou and the others bond remained firm, the Blue Knight would hold tremendous power.

“...Elle.”

“What could it be?”

“What is your personal goal?”

“What could you be talking about?”

Elfaria showed an awfully cute face. It was quite clearly the expression of someone playing dumb.

“Don't act like you don't know what I'm talking about. This is you we're talking about, you didn't make that weapon just because it could be controlled.”

“As expected of Reios-sama. You know me so well!”

Elfaria seemed glad, and as she slightly waved her finger around, she began her explanation.

“My goal is to make Reios-sama essential for the control of that ship so you can't run away from us. I won't repeat the Silver Princess' mistake.”

“...You're the same as always...”

Elfaria's groundwork and ability to create established facts instinctively caused Koutarou to drop his shoulders.

However, since Koutarou had already decided to walk down the same path as the girls of room 106, he didn't think much of it. If anything, he was happy that the friend he had been able to reunite with was the same as always.

“You won't tell me I've gotten beautiful?”

“That will depend on the tea.”

“My, you bully.”

Elfaria poured up tea as Koutarou was looking. The tea was sparkling as beautifully as rubies.

“Here, Reios-sama.”

“Hm.”

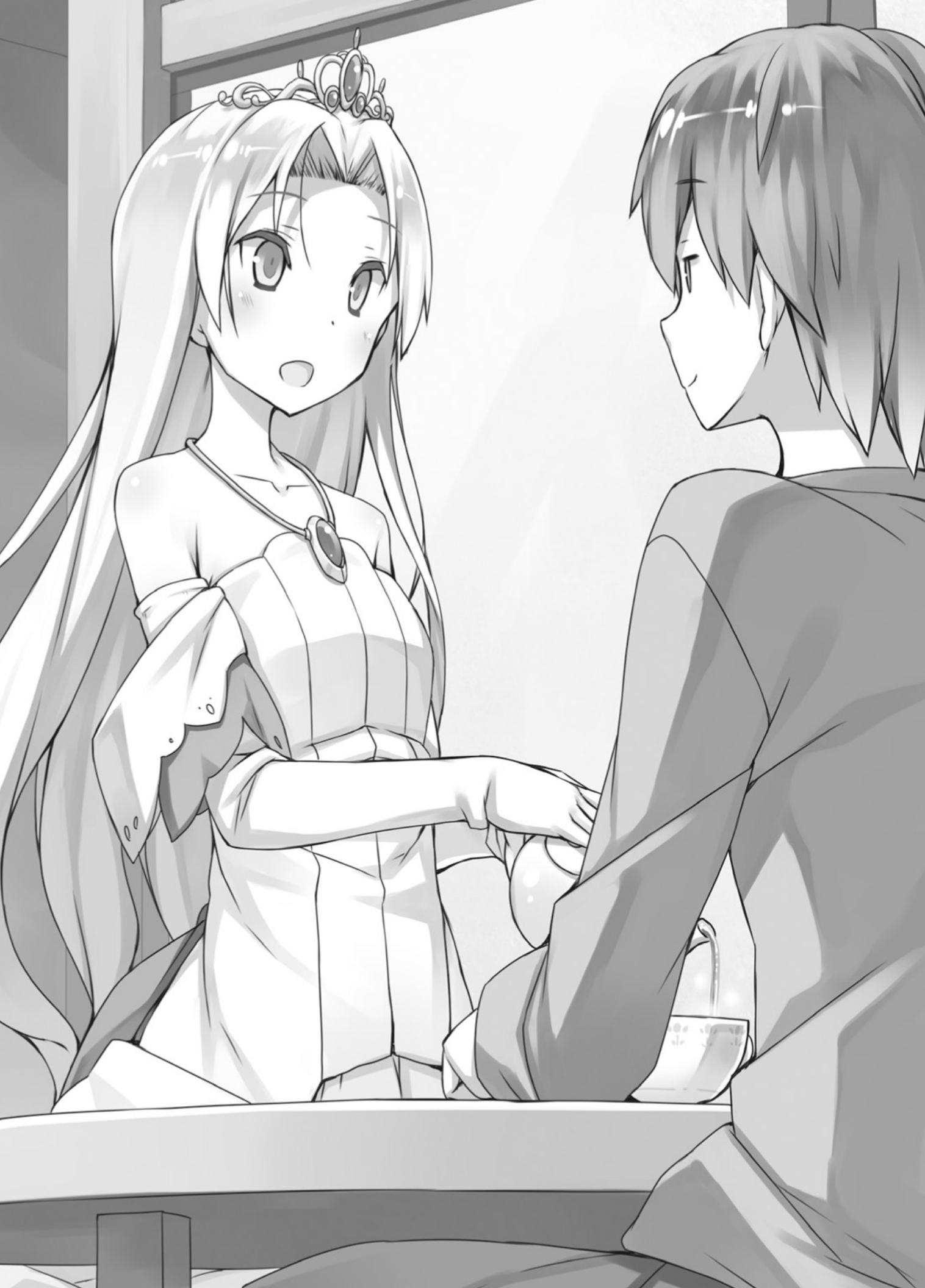
Koutarou grabbed the tea cup and took a sip. As he did a familiar, rich flavor spread throughout his mouth.

I had my suspicions from the smell, but this really is Rubustori tea...

The tea that Elfaria had prepared was made from Koutarou's and Clan's favorite, the Rubustori tea leaf. But since the Rubustori had been extinct for over 800 years it was impossible to acquire in modern Forthorthe. Which meant that this must have been made from the seeds that they had given Elfaria 20 years ago.

So Elle always took care of those seeds...

It was a difficult to grow an extinct tree with no data pertaining to it. On top of that the prime condition to bloom the tea leaves had to be found. That was something that required some serious dedication.



“Hey, Elle.”

“Yes? Did it not taste well?”

“That's not it... do you still—”

Koutarou was about to ask something, but he changed his mind as he spoke.

“—Do you know, that you're still beautiful?”

In the end he said something else. What he was about to say first was something that required a great deal of courage to say to someone far older than him, even if she looked young.

“My...”

Elfaria smiled happily. As she did, she really did look like a young girl, she looked just like she had 20 years in the past.

“That's right, Reios-sama, there are snacks as well.”

“I know you're game. I bet it's spicy.”

“Would you like to eat them together?”

“Only one at a time.”

“Fufufu, okay.”

It was a clear midafternoon Sunday. The sunlight was shining in through the window and lighting up Koutarou and Elfaria. Inside the normally noisy room 106, only Koutarou's and Elfaria's calm voices could be heard. The only other sounds that could be heard was the ticking clock, the cars traveling in the distance and the birds singing. It was a gentle and calm Sunday.

“These are pretty good when you only eat one at a time.”

“That's how they are. I still— love them.”

Like that Koutarou and Elfaria spent their first weekend together in 20 years like nothing had happened.

Part 24

The formerly dim office now had all kinds of lights in it. The cracked wall had been plastered and the ancient desk had been replaced with a brand new one. It was completely different from a few months ago.

“Kenichi-niichan, are you okay?”

“I'm not okay, but if I admit that my heart might break, so I'm okay. By the way, where is Hayato?”

“In the infirmary. He couldn't move his fingers so he went there to have them fix it.”

“Megu-chan, you should eat something.”

“I don't have the appetite to eat. You go ahead and eat, Daisaku-kun. You're our only hope right now.”

But compared to the renewed office, the people inside were worn down. It was as if the worn down aspect of the room had been transferred to them.

The leader in the red jacket was covered with injuries and was leaning over his desk, resting his body. Next to him was a boy in a green jacket with bags under his eyes. The girl in the pink jacket looked a lot thinner than when compared to before. The man in the yellow jacket next to her was worried for her, but even he had bandages wrapped around his head. There was one more member but he was currently in the infirmary.

They were all covered all over with wounds.

“Kotarou, how many times have we mobilized this month?”

“18. No, was it 19?”

“If we're going to be mobilized so often, we're all going be done in eventually.”

“Things suddenly got a lot busier since last month...”

A waste of the national budget. Tax thieves. That is what they used to be called. But nobody would dare call them that now. They had done nothing but work for a while now, they were taking on dangerous jobs on their own and fought.

“Sun Rangers, I bring bad news.”

“What's the matter, professor?”

“It seems like there will be a major battle shortly.”

“What?!”

The Sun Squad, Sun Rangers.

They were the nations ace in the hole regarding unknown threats. The only squad capable of dealing with the invaders.

And if they were busy, it meant that the invaders were busy at work.

Afterword

Long time no see everyone, it's the author, Takehaya.

This volume is a little irregular compared to normal. In it are three episodes that I wanted to write, but wouldn't be able to fill up a volume on their own. But it can't be called an independent collection of short stories as the various problems around Koutarou and the others progress. I wonder what to call these stories (lol).

This time, I would like to continue answering some of the readers questions. This is a question I received through mail; ”The genres used in Takehaya-sensei's works are varied, but which one is your favorite?”.

It's true that the genres are varied, 'Ano Hibi wo Mou Ichido' was a romance, and 'Kaze to Lute no Shirabe ni Nosete' was fantasy. The PS2 and PSP game I wrote the scenario for, 'Secret Game' was suspense and another game I wrote the scenario for 'Seihou no Prismgear' was sci-fi. On top of that, the genre of this work is a mystery.

I have never intentionally decided on a genre. When I write something, I first decide on the theme, after that I pick the genre that would let me cover that theme in the most natural way possible. It might be hard to imagine, but genres are just a means to an end.

That's why I think I'll do the same when I write something else. All I can do is pray that it suits everyone's taste.

That about sums it up. Since this afterword is quite short, this is where I bid you all farewell. I would like to thank everyone at the editorial department

who helped published this book, Poco-san who always draws me cute illustrations and all the readers who bought this book.

Then let us meet again in the afterword for Volume 15.

July, 2013

Takehaya